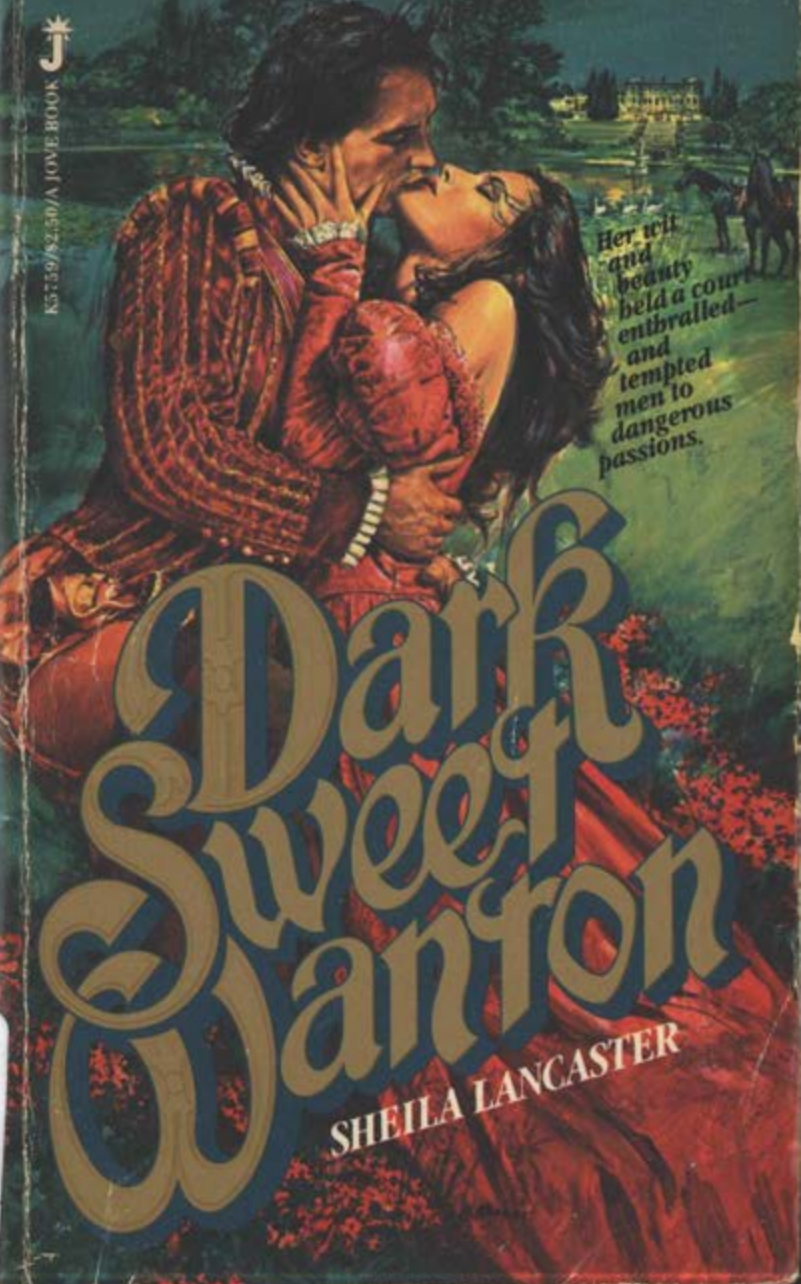
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"Richard, I love you."

Their mouths moved together. Still kissing, they sank to the grass. Her head fell backward helplessly, and his mouth moved down over her exposed throat.

"Yes, yes," she groaned. She clung to him, burying her face in his neck.

"Your mouth tastes of honey," he said. "I hunger for you every night. You fill my dreams, Mall. I think I knew when you were a child that I would love you, but I never guessed it would be so much. I want to take you, Mall." He kissed her savagely, and the sweet salt taste of her blood brought its own message of desire.

"Take me, then," she said, shuddering, her hand curved to the back of his neck, pulling him down toward her.

Dark Sweet Wanton

SHEILA LANCASTER

A JOVE BOOK

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May 1601

THE ROADS WERE bordered with May blossom as they rode out of London. A few white petals blew on to her lap through the open curtains of the litter. Careless largesse of summer, wind-flung, idly scattered on a moment's breath and already withering, their sweet and vulnerable loveliness stained by the touch of rain and the wind's rough handling, she watched them flutter against the black silk of her gown, and through the grey mist of her misery her mind focused on them intently, so that for ever afterwards they remained imprinted on her memory and returned whenever she thought of that bitter journey home: white petals of May too early spoilt.

The litter lurched drunkenly over potholes and ruts, and she swayed with it, trying not to think, trying not to cry. She must achieve distance; not merely from those who had witnessed her humiliation, but from herself. Scandal dies. The court would forget in time that she, like an unwary flower, had been fingered by the passing wind of a light fancy, but she would never forget. Each thought was a thorn pressed into the aching flesh of her wound. The instinct to survive urged a pause now, a necessary halt in existence to give galled flesh a chance to heal itself, to close up the torn edges of her life and knit them once more into a smooth, impenetrable wall. This pain should be her last. On that she was determined. Only the vulnerable experience pain. She would come through this somehow, harden the heart, close the doors of the soul forever. From this day onward no human being should pass the glassy barrier she would erect between herself and a world which had proved traitorous.

She brushed the petals from her skirt with an impatient gesture and stared through the litter curtains at the green countryside stretching before her to the north. She was going

home to Gawsworth. How many times had she passed to and fro along this road, backwards and forwards between London and home, her head always filled with anticipation, for the journey in either direction held such promise. She had always been happy to be going home until now, but the prospect of London had beckoned like a winter beacon, glittering on the dark horizon, all light and colour.

Never again to that, too. She would never see London's dazzling lure held out to her again. Banished like Eve from the Garden of Eden she jogged along the northward road and struggled with memories.

She remembered that first journey to London as if it were yesterday. It had taken them the best part of a week to cover the country, and her back had ached with jogging along rough roads, but she had been too excited to care about discomfort; chattering to Nan endlessly, asking questions, exclaiming over every town they passed through, every pedlar, tumbler or gentleman they met. Country bred, each new sight burst upon her like a firework. Nan, dear Nan, had been patient as ever, but their mother had snapped from time to time: "Oh, hold thy gabbling tongue, for mercy's sake, child!" Then for a while she would be shamefast, only to burst out again when her silence grew too irksome.

1587. The year across which the dark shadow of Spain fell like the shadow of a falcon over a trembling hare. The year which had stretched endlessly between the death of Mary Stuart and that climactic year long prophesied by the astrologers as the time of national eclipse.

She barely remembered now the spirit of dread which had possessed them all. She had been too young at eight years to understand what made her father look so grim when he spoke of Spain or spat the word "Papists" from the corner of his mouth, but something of that grown-up fear had communicated itself to her when she sat in the family pew at Gawsworth and listened to the sermon one Sunday, hearing the low murmur of the people around her like the wail of the wind through Wildboarclough. The preacher leaned on his pulpit and thundered warnings against the bloody church of Rome, whose corporal arm stretched out from Spain to threaten them; not with destruction of the body alone, but of the immortal soul. He spoke of evil men gnawing at the fabric of the state like caterpillars, and the image awoke terror in her, a horror of soft furry bodies writhing and consuming the green leaves.

She covered her face with her hands and screamed. There was a flurry of excitement among the congregation. Nan, pale and concerned, asked what was the matter, but their mother, grim-faced, whirled her out of the church into the wind-ruffled churchyard where she shook her angrily and slapped her. "How dare you behave with such lack of dignity before the whole church? I am ashamed to call you daughter." Sobbing, helpless to explain, she was led home. For years she suffered recurrent nightmares in which the caterpillars crawled towards her while she stood frozen with dread.

Soon afterwards they had set out to ride to London to see Nan married, but beneath the bright surface of their happiness in this family event had run a darker vein of unspoken fear that all things were about to fall apart. Should Spain invade England life, as the Fyttons knew it, would come to a hasty, bloody end. Their fortunes were tied to the Queen, and the Protestant church. That journey south had been a strange, contradictory time of joy and terror. Looking back she saw it as a patchwork of light and shade, but for her, at least, the brightness had been dominant.

CHAPTER ONE

April 30th, 1587

SHE CROUCHED ON the windowseat in the chill dawn light, her dark eyes peering through a crack in the shutters at a garden shrouded in white river mist. Dripping from branch to branch the wet drops filtered through new green leaves, hanging like soft crystal before falling with a barely audible splash into the puddles under the trees. Coils of mist blew softly past the house. No birds sang. A dank silence seemed to cover everything in the world.

Her bedgown was crumpled. Her black hair hung loose around her thin shoulders. She shivered. Her fingers were still raw from yesterday when she and the other girls had knotted flowers into chains to hang around the house. At first it had been an enchanting pastime. The whole house had smelt of spring. But slowly pleasure had turned to labour. Her neck had throbbed, her fingers grown weary.

Nan had noticed. She always did. "You have done enough, sweetheart," she had said. Glad to be dismissed Mall had run out of the unfamiliar, over-crowded house they had rented into the gardens. Lady Fytton was busy in the kitchens or Mall would never have gained her freedom even for an hour. Standing beneath the trees she had stared across the village of Stepney and heard a misselthrush perched on a bough singing his heart out to the sky.

Stepney lay beyond the city walls in a district of woods and fields much favoured by wealthy Londoners who built country houses out there to escape the stink of the crowded streets.

They had ridden through London, out of the Aldgate, past ramshackle tenements from which the poor spilled like ants from an ant heap: dirty, ragged, starving children, sullen, hostile men and women, who lived in makeshift houses which lurched in every wind like sinking galleys. Alleys and courts

huddled together, so narrow that only one man could pass, mud and sewage forcing the people to wear wooden clogs to raise them above the filth and stench.

She had received an impression of squalor and defeat which had chilled her heart.

She had not seen such poverty in Cheshire. On the estates at Gawsworth the people had their own place in the order of things: their own neat little cottage with a garden, their own pig or goat, their hens and geese. Their children fed well on fresh vegetables grown in their gardens. Good meat was cheap in autumn when the herds were culled. Fish and game were plentiful on common land.

Of course, there were fewer people on Gawsworth now than there had been in her grandfather's day. Enclosures had made it hard to support a family. The sheep which ran on the uplands had eaten up the people, driving many from the land. The old system of strip farming had been wasteful, her father said. The land produced more now, but held fewer people, and she knew each one in the village by sight. Tam Smith, John Gableman, old Alice Harrower with her toothless gums, pressed at the back of her mind like shadows in a firelit room; each face known and named, each with a background as solid as the earth beneath their feet.

Generation after generation, the people of Gawsworth had opened their eyes on the green Cheshire hills, they fed and were fed by the land, and when they died they were received into the same nourishing earth to join their forefathers. Their lives were rounded and whole, moving with the seasons on a ceaseless clock of duty, everything with a place and time of its own.

But these Londoners, in their stinking rags, were too many for the heart to encompass. Shifting like the filthy water in the gutters of their alleys, lacking place or purpose, rootless, filled with the resentment of those who are cut off from life, they were as makeshift as the hovels they lived in, and their lives blew out like candles.

Were any of them Cheshire men once, she had wondered, shivering? Driven off the land by sheep, thrown up on London's shore like unwanted driftwood to decay and fester?

She had been relieved to pass from the city outskirts into the broad, green sweep of the countryside beyond. It was clear why the district was so famous: woods, little wandering streams, fields of new-planted barley and rye, enchanted her,

and the spire of St. Dunstan's guided them to Stepney along the narrow road.

Voices raised in the next chamber broke upon her thoughts. She crept across the chamber, her bare feet accustomed to the rough brush of the rushes.

Listening with an ear to the wall, she recognised her mother's voice, hushed, yet holding a bitter anger.

"I can never forget it was you who made this match! Well, you must bear the consequences. That would not matter if you bore them alone, but my poor Nan will pay for your folly for the rest of her life."

"Newdegate," Sir Edward began, but was cut off at once by his wife's angry voice.

"Newdegate! I wish I had never heard the name. A ne'er-do-well with a mountain of debts which will never be paid!"

"His debts are his own affair." Her father sounded half asleep, his voice thick with yawning. Like the rest of the household he had been up half the night in preparation for the wedding.

Lady Fytton laughed contemptuously. Mall recognised the sound. How often had it been directed at her! She visualised the heavy, jowled face, the dark eyes and black brows which gave such emphasis to the barbed words spitting from the full, red mouth. Lady Fytton had been known to stoop to rubbing her lips with geranium petals to give them colour, but when her temper was aroused her mouth had a natural scarlet.

"His own affair? God give me patience with this foolish man! When it is because Newdegate is afraid of being taken up for debt that we must celebrate this marriage out here beyond the city limits? Do you think your sisters do not know that?"

"My sisters gabbled like women around a village well. There is no shame to us—I tell you, Arbury is securely settled on John. His father cannot touch it. I've had my lawyers tie it up fast on him."

Lady Fytton grunted. "Aye, well, I hope it may be so." She shifted her ground, coming to her real grievance. "She could have married at Gawsworth, though, and been near home. How am I to have her go so far away? Our grandchildren will grow up strangers to us."

"Do you not think I will miss my Nan and long to see her children?" Sir Edward's voice was weary. "Have we not

always said our children should have happy marriages? I would not wed Nan to some greybeard, however rich. John loves her. As to Cheshire . . . why, half the county is too close in blood. It is not wise for cousins to marry."

Lady Fytton sighed. "That's true enough." She knew the Fytton family sprawled across the county like a spider's web across a wall. Sir Edward had been one of fifteen children, most of whom were still living, most of whom had married into good Cheshire families.

There had been Fyttons at Gawsworth since the middle of the fourteenth century. The manor had come to them by marriage, and marriage had been the cornerstone of their policy for advancing the family. They had married into every local family of note. Their fertility and tenacity of life had been invaluable. Filled with abundant physical energy and consuming ambition, they played life's game energetically. They rode from their manors to every family occasion: birth, marriage, death, to see and be seen, to judge the value to themselves of every new connection, evaluate the possibilities of each new child. The family strength lay in this cohesive quality. Though each schemed, manipulated, manoeuvred for himself, they knew the ultimate value of the family as a united whole. Where Fytton interests clashed they accepted that it was every man for himself, but against outsiders they stood united.

Sir Edward had married Alice Holcroft, heiress to an estate in Lancashire. She had given him two sons and two daughters. Their boys, Ned and Dick, had been born a year apart, with Nan following rapidly a year later. Lady Fytton had been ill for months after Nan's birth, and another three years passed before Mall arrived to complete the quartet. Desperate at this final pregnancy, Lady Fytton resented the child even before her birth, and after it refused to bear any more children. Her coldness to Mall had passed un-noticed in the busy round of household duties. Too ill to give her suck, Lady Fytton gave her entirely into the care of nurses. Recovering her natural physical vitality gradually, the mother then concentrated all her love upon her first three children, especially the two boys. Dick was a thin, sallow silent boy with his mother's dark eyes. Shy, withdrawn, he was only happy riding over Gawsworth with his brother on their stubby ponies. The eldest, Ned, was broad and healthy with thick brown hair and fierce, bright Fytton eyes. Already, at fifteen,

he showed a regrettable fondness for the company of village girls and was eager for pleasure.

Her parents had dropped their voices and a snore brought her attention back to the occupants of her own chamber. She looked round at the bed which stood in the centre: a handsome piece of furniture with heavy velvet curtains shielding the occupants from draughts and morning light. The pale light stealing slyly across the room would not penetrate the stuffy darkness within it, nor wake the sleepers huddled together like puppies. Six of them had been put to sleep together. It had been an uncomfortable night. Mall's sensitive nose had disliked the odour of so many bodies cramped in one space: Nan, her black hair in two tails, bony-shanked Aunt Joan of Poynton, dear Aunt Bess, snoring with open mouth and arm flung clear of Aunt Meg's nightcapped head, her plump dirty feet thrust between Nan and Aunt Joan. Mall had snuggled close to Nan's back, avoiding Aunt Anne's feet, the toenails of which were unkempt and scratched horribly.

Mall jumped as two bare white feet and some naked legs slid between the curtains.

"Mall! What o'clock is it?" Nan's voice shook nervously. Mall thought how strange it was that it had been she who lay awake all night while Nan slept deeply at her side. She grinned at her sister. "The maids are all up. It must be well nigh seven."

Nan gave a sickly smile. "So late already?" She hugged her arms around herself. Past twelve, her physical development had been rapid in the last six months. Her breasts were well shaped, her body rounding out of childhood into womanhood, and one could see now that she would be a softer version of their mother.

She had the strong nose and firm mouth which in their mother were so dominant, but set in a round, placid face, with soft dark eyes and curly black hair. No doubt in later life Nan would run to fat, too, for she had a sweet tooth and a hearty appetite, but, for the moment, she was nicely rounded in the right places; her waist curving inwards above the broad sweep of her hips, which, her mother said complacently, were good child-bearing hips. Her brows were as black and heavy as her mother's but Nan's smile was sweet and warm, bestowing on her face a charm their mother lacked.

Mall shared the same colouring, but in all other respects was her sister's opposite. Her thin little face was plain, her

brows faint above her almond-shaped black eyes, their natural arch giving to her expression a faint hauteur emphasised by her long, thin nose and calm mouth.

"A changeling," her mother called her, black eyes snapping angrily. Remote, silent, given to hours of dreamy contemplation, she was constantly in trouble, for she lacked Nan's practical common sense. Although her slight fingers were deft enough with her needle, or when she played the virginals, she grew bored with the household tasks expected of a gentlewoman who would one day rule a manor. She was given to sudden outbursts of slightly hysterical laughter over nothing. Her sharp, quick mind saw humour where nobody else did, and her flashes of wit merely irritated her mother.

Believing it to be her duty to chastise the child for her soul's sake, Lady Fytton whipped Mall frequently, convincing herself that her dislike of her had no connection with these constant whippings. Mall knew that Nan was their mother's favourite child and that Lady Fytton did not love herself. She did not resent Nan, but the injustice of it ate into her soul, breeding both anger and guilt, for surely it must be her own fault if her mother could not love her?

"Is our mother up?" Nan asked, opening the chamber door and peering out. The shutters had been taken down in the hall. Pale light lay in pools across the rushy floor. The scent of flowers drifted up from the walls. They could see the bright garlands they had woven, swaying in a draught: butter-pale primroses and dark violets in smooth chains.

"Are you frightened, Nan?" Mall asked, seeing something disturbing in her sister's face.

Nan went bright red and laughed. "Of course not, child!" She had lately taken to calling Mall "child", imitating their mother, as she did now always, as though she formed herself on Lady Fytton's pattern.

"Things will never be the same again," Mall muttered. Nan hugged her warmly, their black hair mingled, Nan's curling, Mall's straight and sleek.

"Silly, I shall still live at Gawsworth. John must go back to finish his schooling. I must not live with him until I am grown up."

Mall's strange, slanting eyes grew secretive. "Father is afraid you will have a baby and die."

"Don't," said Nan, paling. "It's ill to speak of such things

on a wedding day." She believed every old wives' tale she heard.

"Women often die." Mall could still speak of death easily, too young to believe in it. "Do you remember Moll Weaver? She was fifteen when she died of childbirth . . ."

Nan put her hands over her ears, her face pale. "But I have good child-bearing hips," she mimicked Lady Fytton, making Mall begin to giggle.

"My hips are thin," she said more soberly. "I would probably die if I had a child. I'll never marry, then I cannot die of it."

Nan laughed. "Oh, you'll sing a different song when a young man looks twice at you . . ."

Mall's thin brows were level above her nose. "I'll not," she said stubbornly.

"Father means to find you a rich husband," said Nan, but Mall looked more mulish than ever. "I do not care how rich a man is, I'll not wed!"

The swish of water pouring into a large earthenware basin heralded the arrival of a maid who grinned at them teasingly, and disturbed the slumbers of the others behind the curtain. There was heaving and yawning, then Aunt Bess climbed out of the bed like a ruffled hen, scratching her plump body busily, her hair stuck with goose feathers. "I'm alive with fleas this morning, my chucks. God helps us, I will be afidget in the church!"

The two girls began to laugh, and she turned her warm loving smile upon them, her eyes bright. "Nan, my sweetheart, I wish you joy and a long life with your John. May God smile upon your love and your house be filled with happiness."

"Hah!" Aunt Joan sneered, her long thin face sarcastic. "What do you know of it, Bess? You married Thomas for Vale Royal not for love!"

"I know what any happy wife knows," said Aunt Bess cheerfully. "A roll between the sheets with your own man makes life the merrier."

Nan and Mall bit their lips, knowing that to laugh at that would bring down wrath upon their supposedly innocent heads.

"If our father had heard you say that, Elizabeth Holcroft, you would have been whipped until the blood ran!" Joan looked scandalised.

"Father is dead," said Aunt Bess with apparent relish.

"He'll whip no more. And I would rather Nan went to her marriage bed with joy than with foreboding."

The other two sisters were listening impassively as they splashed their faces and arms with water: Aunt Anne with her long, horse face and weathered skin, Aunt Meg looking like a neat child as always, her diminutive body clean and sweet-smelling, her morning face shining beneath her brown hair. They had long ago ceased to intervene in squabbles between Joan and Bess. Their childhoods had been punctuated by them.

Then the maids began to flock into the chamber, aproned and giggling, staring at Nan as if expecting her to have grown two heads overnight.

It had begun, Mall thought. Today I lose Nan.

The chamber grew so crowded there was scarce room to move, and Fytton voices sounded loudly, in irritation, talking rapidly at each other, interrupting, laughing, each convinced in her own mind that she was the centre of God's universe, such arrogance being the cast mark of the Fytton tribe. They reminisced, signed, lamented vanished days, scolded their maids for clumsiness, teased Nan and mocked her blushes yet loved her for them, whispered to each other their private views of the groom and his family and indulged in long-running personal squabbles between themselves. As in most large families, there were close-knit factions among the Fyttons, with those close of age at war with elder brothers and sisters; the lines of division splitting them into interconnecting parties. Ancient quarrels begun in childhood smouldered into middle age, fed by fresh insult, fresh defeat. Beneath the tight surface of the family façade ran infinitesimal cracks invisible to the outside eye, suppressed in public, yet deeply felt by the Fyttons in their own circle.

Lady Fytton bustled in, stiffly encased in dark green silk, her high ruff starched into miraculous pleats. Mall fell back to watch, from the corner, as Nan become the centre of events.

She was pushed and pulled, scolded and coaxed, until at last she stood fully dressed in her new gown of milk white silk, with full puffed sleeves, hand ruffs at the wrists, a fan-shaped ruff rising at the back of the head from the low neckline of her bodice.

Lady Fytton stood back, her hard black eyes shining with pride. "My Nan, you look very well, very well indeed . . ."

The aunts chimed in agreement, even Aunt Joan having nothing but praise today. Indeed, the white silk set off Nan's

dark looks and even her plump little hands looked slim with John's betrothal ring upon them.

"April is a lucky month for weddings," Aunt Bess said happily. "To think, tomorrow is May Day, and the woods here will be alive with Londoners coming out to celebrate it . . ."

"A custom which would be best forgotten," said Aunt Joan in distaste. "It only leads to drunken folly and a crop of bastards nine months later."

Mall found herself in her mother's way and was slapped angrily. "God'a'mercy, child, get out of my path. Must you be always pushing forward?"

Her father coming in touched Mall's cheek lightly where a red mark glowed, but said nothing, having learnt to hold his tongue for her sake. Aunt Bess, quick to sympathise, quickly drew her aside and helped her dress in her new gown of orange tawny dressed with bridal knots of green.

Nan, flushed and tremulously smiling, was turning in a circle that her father might view her from all angles. "My Nan," he said, thickly. He bent to kiss her, but was pushed away by his wife.

"You'll crush her gown . . ."

Aunt Joan's thin brows lifted. She exchanged a sardonic glance with Aunt Anne. Lady Fytton was not loved by her husband's sisters. They resented her irritable, busy nature.

Someone brought forward the bridal garland, woven of myrtle, rosemary, bay and spring flowers with gilded wheat ears prominent, a symbol of fertility, and, oddly, borne on the Fytton coat of arms.

Sir Edward took it and placed it in Nan's hand to carry until after the ceremony when John would place it on her head. Many women kept their garlands all their lives, laid away in a chest.

"Are we all ready?" Sir Edward asked his wife. She nodded reluctantly. Nan was the first of her children to marry, and she felt a desire to pause, but she knew it was impossible. Sighing, she said, "We are ready."

They would walk across Stepney Green to St. Dunstan's: the minstrels going first, playing, their music drawing the villagers to stare. Mall would follow them, carrying the Bridal Cup, with its sprig of rosemary and trailing green ribbons. As she moved forward Lady Fytton hissed at her. "Drop that cup

and it will be the worse for you, my girl," her hard fingers pinching Mall's thin arms.

"Let be, wife," murmured Sir Edward wearily. "You make the child nervous." His sisters gave each other secret looks of wrath.

Out of the house the procession passed, noisily proclaiming the joy of the occasion. Weddings were always gay occasions, especially with such a large, far-flung family, giving them a chance to compete with each other in display of wealth, the guests like peacocks as they followed the pretty bride to church.

John Newdegate waited at the altar, his hands clinched at his sides. A thick-set, serious youth of seventeen, he felt the occasion deeply. Bred in an extravagant, unstable home he longed for stability, a wife, the quiet domestic scene he had never had as a child. His father, opulent in plum velvet, knelt brooding upon the arrogance of the Fyttons, wondering if he might borrow a few hundred pounds from one of them, although closer acquaintance with them left him little hope.

The music blared at the back of the church, reedy and defiant. The groom turned. Mall caught a glimpse of his white face as she moved steadily towards him. She thought of Nan and John with wonder. One day they would be formally bedded, husband and wife in all, and the very idea made her want to giggle, her face contorted with sudden wild laughter.

The service began. The two young voices, barely audible, repeated the vows after the priest, exchanged rings, kissed. Women sobbed softly, smiling at each other, and men cleared their throats, eyeing their wives with irritation. It was almost a relief when the sermon began, thought Mall, for such emotion could screw one up to such a height it became painful.

Listening to the beautiful, barely comprehensible to her, allegories of the sermon on love, Mall heard her stomach rumble, and thought yearningly of food: crisp-crusted bread, pink roast beef, delicious egg and milk whipped into a pudding flavoured with honey. She dwelt on visions of delight, licking her lips, her eyes closed.

"Do you dare to fall asleep?" her mother hissed, nudging her with a look which promised retribution.

After the ceremony the Bridal Cup she had carried, filled with best Muscatel, had sops of cake floated bobbing on it, and one of the groomsmen passed it around the guests, each

guest sipping briefly, trying to suck up a sop of cake for luck. Mall tried hard, but failed, the wine dribbling down her chin, with her mother's angry black stare upon her small face.

After the solemnity of the service, this grew into a game of stifled giggles among the younger guests. The wine, on an empty stomach, raised their spirits to contemplation of the pleasures to come.

They went back to the house once more, some of the young people actually capering along to the music, bringing down glances of disapproval from the older guests.

"Unseemly," muttered Aunt Joan. "Such riot is all very well for the poorer sort, but it brings our name into dishonour to have such games at a family wedding."

At the house the servants crowded, eager for a first glimpse of bride and groom. Nan was a blushing rose, her hands crushed by John as they walked together.

Mall tried to make herself invisible to avoid catching her mother's eye during the wedding breakfast. The tables were heavily laden with rich food. The guests helped themselves and talked in their loud, Fytton voices. Mall found a quiet corner behind a tall, thin boy of about the same age as the groom. His curly hair was a fascinating red and he wore a rich, green slashed doublet and matching Venetians, the fashionable knee breeches worn by the court. His wide cartwheel ruff made it hard for him to turn his head as he talked to his companion, a very beautiful girl in an amber-coloured farthingale trimmed with Nan's green lover's knots. Mall watched them, her hands laden with food she had snatched from a table. She noticed how huge and over-bright were the girl's blue eyes as she looked up at the boy, how quickly she talked, her voice high and shrill as a curlew calling over the Cheshire downland.

Munching cold partridge and a slab of thickly packed game pie, Mall wondered if this was their second cousin, Richard Leveson, sure she remembered him from a christening party in Lancashire a year ago, when he had stood godfather to the babe. She recalled that fierce, blunt manner of speaking from an argument he had had with some of the older men. Her father had laughed later, saying young Richard had no taste for courtesies but a good brain for all that, sharp-witted and quick to learn. The Fyttons valued the connection, for the Levesons had an ancient name and broad estates in Staffordshire and Shropshire. Like the Fyttons, they were of the middle

rank of gentility, as solid as the houses they built, respected in their counties and serving the Queen at all levels of government.

I could not mistake that red hair, Mall thought with amusement. Nor his deep, brusque voice.

"Did I tell you my falcon, Roland, is dead?" the girl said. "He caught a chill and died the same day. My father has given me another, but he will not let me have it until it is fully trained." Her eyes flashed angrily. "I want to train it myself. They are never fully yours if someone else had had the training of them."

"My dear Margaret, it is no task for a girl, your father is right. Too dangerous."

The blue eyes grew suddenly hot with rage. "Do you think I am afraid of a falcon? A poor sort of creature I would be if I were! I like to be a little in danger, anyway." Her red mouth parted, moist with excitement. "It is exciting to stand on the brink. You men have all the pleasure of danger to yourselves."

Richard laughed, half admiration, half dismay. "I doubt we take much pleasure in danger. We have to face it out, that is all."

Her strange, hot eyes narrowed. "Oh, if I were a man! I would outface destruction every day!"

He stared down at her. "Christ aid me, you are a strange girl," he murmured.

"When we are wed, will you take me voyaging on your ship?" she asked eagerly.

"Good Christ, no! The men would mutiny."

"Flog them," she retorted.

"I'd end up in the water if I did," he grinned. "Your father must have told you how unlucky it is to have a woman on board. A ship is female, Margaret, and jealous of her crew. She'll bear no rivals."

The strange blue eyes seemed to shimmer with interest. "A ship and a falcon, both dangerous, both born to be conquered. Oh, I wish I were not a girl! All the things I want to do are forbidden to me because of my sex."

"There are other things," he murmured, his voice dropping intimately.

The white lids lowered over her eyes, she put out a long-fingered hand to touch his sleeve. "Ah, that is the one consolation . . ." Her light voice whispered. Mall, peering

round the boy, saw the tip of a pink tongue passed over Margaret's parted lips.

"Dear heart," Richard murmured hungrily. He lifted her hand to his mouth. Mall saw his neck bend, the ruff rising with it. His lips lingered long against the pink-fleshed inner palm.

The girl laughed, her voice soaring high. She pulled her hand away and rubbed it against her gown. The bright eyes mocked him. "You are too greedy. There's but a short while to our own wedding day, remember."

Suddenly she saw Mall's little face peering round his arm and leaned forward, her fingers becoming claws, to snatch the child out from her hiding place. "What's this? You little eavesdropper, I'll box your ears for you."

Terrified of drawing her mother's attention, Mall shivered in the spiteful grip of thin fingers.

Richard Leveson said quickly, "Margaret! You are frightening the child! She did no harm."

"I do not like tale-bearers," Margaret snapped, glaring into Mall's pale face.

"I . . . I was eating, not listening," Mall whispered.

She was shaken violently. "Let me not see you again, little ears, or it will go hard with you!"

Released, Mall fled. She bumped against a lean velvet back and found herself caught by her great-uncle Francis. He bent to smile into her face. His beard brushed her skin. "Well, is it you, Mall?"

She looked nervously around. "Yes, sir."

He laughed. "Fear not. Your mother is in the upper chamber with Nan. Come and dance with me."

Hot-cheeked, she let him lead her out to where the younger guests were dancing to the music of the minstrels. They were leaping and swinging their partners energetically, their faces flushed with exertion.

"You are just the partner for a weak old man, Mall," Uncle Francis told her. "Why, I could lift you as easily as a feather! Now your Aunt Bess needs the giant Magog to lift her!"

She giggled. "If Aunt Bess heard you she would be very cross!"

His warm brown eyes winked down at her. "She is never cross for long, sweeting."

His bear hug and greying brown hair put her in mind of an

old bear kept at Chester, tolerantly swiping out at the tormenting hounds with one great, lazy paw. Uncle Francis had just that air of easy authority. Kind, strong, patient, understanding Uncle Francis.

"I shall call you Uncle Bear," she told him, dimpling.

He roared. "Why is that, sweeting?"

She told him and he laughed even louder. "Bears hug little girls to bits," he told her teasingly, squeezing her tight against his russet velvet, then lifting her high, her heels kicking the air.

She laughed down at him, breathless.

"Why, Mall," he said, struck by her glowing colour and bright eyes. "You will be a beauty when you are grown, I swear! I never saw it before."

She was delighted.

Later he kept her near him, in the strong circle of his arm, while he talked to some of the other men. Sometimes Mall thought she would hear nothing all her life but talk of war and Spain. The black threat dominated all their lives. They spoke of ships and soldiers, of the Queen and her ministers, of the hidden Papists who tunnelled under the solid fabric of their lives and threatened all.

Listening in silence, Mall noticed another in the circle who kept silent, although everyone else looked to him as they spoke, as though half fearing, half hoping for a reaction.

She did not know him, but his rich black doublet and jewelled chains hinted at wealth, and he bore himself with calm hauteur, his long, thin face bearing a resemblance which evaded her. Where had she seen a face like that before? High-bred, alive, with reined vitality?

At last he did speak, quietly, and the others turned eagerly to listen. "True, Spain has larger ships, more wealth, more men, but we have an advantage she lacks. We fight for our lives. Men fight like devils when there is no other way out. We have the best seamen in the world. All Spain's riches cannot change that."

"If only the Queen would build more ships, my lord," Uncle Francis said.

"We all wish that," the other man sighed. "But Her Grace does not have the King of Spain's treasury to draw on, remember. She has to eke out what she has, and she does it admirably. I am in hope that London will supply us with ships if the Spanish sail against us. I do not hope for much

from the Queen. She has too many calls upon her purse." He nodded courteously round the circle of attentive faces. "Her Grace is happy in her subjects. I know she is grateful for your love."

"And we for hers," said Uncle Francis deeply. There was a general murmur of agreement, heads nodded.

A smile lit the highly bred face, the gentleman bowed and moved politely away, to join another group.

Aunt Bess's husband, Sir Thomas Holcroft of Vale Royal, gave a deep approving grunt. "Young Dick Leveson did well for himself, marrying into Lord Howard's family. A good match."

"Oh, she's a rich heiress," agreed Uncle Francis. "But high-strung and wilful, I believe. The Howard blood is tainted with in-breeding. For all her beauty and her inheritance, I would think twice if Dick were my son. She has a look I find worrying."

"You're too nice, Uncle," Tom Holcroft said, grinning. "It's time you found yourself a wife."

Uncle Francis winked at him. "I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. You married men must always envy bachelors their freedom."

Aunt Joan's husband said slowly, in his Cheshire burr. "All the same, it is a fine thing for the Fyttons to have one of their kin wed into the Queen's own family. Lord Howard being the Queen's cousin will have her ear."

"My nephew Edward already has access to the Queen through Sir William Knollys," Uncle Francis said flatly. "Nan's young bridegroom is related to the Knollys family by marriage."

"The Queen always advances her cousins," nodded another uncle. "Although she never mentions her mother, she shows how she feels in the favour she shows anyone who can claim blood ties with the Boleyns."

Uncle Tom Holcroft laughed. "Aye, but the Levesons must be mad with delight over Dick's match. A better one than little Nan's, after all. She weds the son of a half-beggared scoundrel. Dick is wedding the Howard fortune."

"Hush," Uncle Francis said quickly, gesturing to Mall.

The circle of flushed faces turned downwards to gaze at her. She quivered under their stare. Uncle Francis said gently, "Run out and play in the garden, child. It is hot in here. But do not stain your new clothes or your mother will be angry."

She dropped a hurried curtsey and scampered away. The garden was cool and green after the crowded room. She wandered down a little winding path under apple trees, her feet slipping on the grass, still wet from that morning's mist. The sky had cleared to a bright blue. The wind rustled her skirts and cooled her face.

She stood to listen to a blackbird. His bright, round eye swivelled to watch her, but he continued his song before flying off across the lawns, listening with head cocked sideways to hear the hidden tunnelling of worms beneath the soil.

"We meet again, little ears," murmured an amused voice behind her.

Heart in her throat, she turned, ready to run.

Richard Leveson watched her, one hand resting lightly on his quilted hip. His brown eyes were friendly.

She looked past him in anxiety.

He grinned. "I am alone," he said with quick understanding. "Margaret stayed within, we quarrelled over that damn falcon."

"She is very beautiful," Mall said politely. But I don't like her, she thought. She is strange. Uncle Francis is right. She has a high-strung face.

Richard laughed harshly. "Yes," he agreed. "She is very beautiful."

"You are going to marry her," Mall said, staring at him, wondering if he really wished to marry such a wild, strange creature.

"Yes," he said grimly. He stared beyond her at the blue sky as though defying some invisible power. "When you grow up, little ears, you will know that love is a madness which is incurable."

He puzzled her. She thought of her parents, of Nan and John. They loved each other, but there was no madness in their love.

He looked down, smiling at her knitted brows. "What a quaint little face, my sweeting. What sort of man will you marry, I wonder?"

"I will never marry," she said with determination.

He laughed. "Your exquisite reason, my dear?"

She suspected he mocked her, but answered flatly, "Married women have babies and die."

The sandy brows drew together. His brown eyes lost their

smile. He made a rough sound of protest. "What put such dark thoughts into your little head?"

"A girl in our village died having a baby," she said.

"A village girl?" He sounded incredulous.

"I was fond of her," Mall said. Impossible to explain to him her feelings when the quick, bright life of Moll Weaver was snuffed out overnight.

"These things happen," he said comfortingly. "But most women bear their babies safely."

"Well, I shall never marry, and then I cannot die in childbed," Mall said. She looked up at him, her black eyes slanting beneath their transparent white lids. "I shall not fall in love, either, if it means you go mad. I never knew that."

"Oh, take no note of what I said," he hurriedly interrupted. "You will find love one day, and it will be sweet as wine."

"You are not glad to be in love," she suspected aloud. "It makes you angry."

"God save us, child, but you are sharp!" The brown eyes stared down at her in startled appraisal.

She heard her mother calling and her small face grew pale. "Oh, I must go . . ."

He caught her arm as she turned to run. "What is your name, child?"

She stared, surprised he did not know. "I am Mary Fytton."

"Ah, the bride's sister," he nodded. "Well, Mistress Mary . . ."

"They call me Mall," she said.

He laughed. "Then, Mall, remember me, for I swear I will remember thee!"

She looked at him for a second, her dark eyes wide, then ducked back towards the house and a scolding from her mother. "Getting your clothes dirty playing in the wet! If I were not so busy I would see thee whipped! Get to thy sister. She needs your help."

The rest of the day passed as noisily as the earlier part. Mall fell asleep that night as soon as she was undressed, her body limp with weariness, Nan's curved softness close behind her back, the room stuffy with the vinous breath of their aunts who snored away virtuously in a slumber heavy from over-indulgence at table.

May Day dawned golden and warm. The whole party went out to Stepney Woods to picnic under the trees and watch the entertainments.

Many of the greater folk had gone, including Lord Howard, his daughter and her betrothed, but the Cheshire Fyttons remained and joined in the May Revels enthusiastically. They applauded the tumblers who walked on their hands and rolled like hoops across the grass. They laughed at the jesters with their lewd, rough jokes. They bought trinkets from the pedlars who made the woods noisy with their cries.

Uncle Francis bought Mall a small wooden doll dressed in blue velvet scraps. She carried it in the crook of her arm all day. Never had she felt so free, so happy. Her mother had no time to notice her, and her Fytton relatives made a fuss of her, buying her sweetmeats and fair favours so that she grew more and more flushed and excited.

The day was over too soon for her. Lying in her bed she heard the last drunken songs of the departing Londoners as they wandered back to the city. She had envied them their freedom as they sprawled over the grass, stuffing their food into themselves, drinking from earthenware jugs, while their rough-clad little children ran and screamed and played around them. No scolding mother reined their pleasure. They roved free as air. She turned her face into her pillow and slowly sank to sleep.

A week later they rode back to Gawsworth, the bridal festivities behind them, the road out of London shimmering in the early morning sunshine. Every mile put distance between Mall and her brief taste of freedom, but she had memories to feed on; memories of Richard Leveson, his image sharp upon her mind as though incised with a knife. He had not needed to request she remember him. She knew she would never forget him, or his fierce falcon of a bride with her strange, wild, untamed eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

MONTHS LATER SHE heard that Richard Leveson had married his wild Margaret, the Queen herself dancing at their wedding festivities, and left London with her to visit her family estates in Norfolk. The only Fytton present was Great-Uncle Francis, who happened to be at court when it took place. Lady Fytton, who had pinned much upon being at this greatest wedding of the year, was filled with bitter resentment at being excluded. "Too proud to know us now, we are not high enough for them!" She crumpled Uncle Francis's letter and flung it in the fire. Even Sir Edward was angry, for he had hoped that his new connection with the Knollys family would reap rich rewards in patronage and this first rebuff bit deep.

Nan settled down once more at Gawsworth while her young husband continued his studies at her father's expense, and Mall found herself almost forgetting that Nan was now a wife.

That year passed slowly, turning upon one question which filled all minds: would the Spanish come? The summer went by, then winter, then the spring of 1588 dawned, the year widely prophesied as being that which would bring Europe to a fateful climax. The whole country was busy with plans to combat invasion. After Drake sailed into Cadiz and burnt the Spanish ships at harbour there, plans for war were seen to be inevitable.

No one believed that Philip of Spain would brook such an insult. Had Drake been given his way, he would have attacked the whole Spanish fleet lying at anchor in the mouth of the river Tagus, but as so often in the past, the Queen herself hampered his attempts. Messages came to him aboard a fast-sailing pinnace from England ordering him to retire at once without attacking the other ships. Bitterly angry, Drake obeyed, returning home like a man possessed. The Queen, he said, to all who dared listen, had defeated them by her folly. Elizabeth

still hoped to make a last-ditch treaty with Spain. Hating war, hating the expense, she would go to any lengths to achieve peace. So while their Queen vainly negotiated and refused to spend a penny on the fleet, the people of England did what they could to shore up the crumbled bulwarks of their defence, spending their own money since the Queen would not open her purse.

London freely offered ten thousand men and thirty ships to Lord Howard, the Admiral of the Fleet, who gratefully accepted them. The Queen herself had thirty-four ships in as good a condition as her sailors could achieve when she refused to pay for their upkeep beyond what was absolutely essential if they were to stay afloat.

Plymouth harbour slowly grew packed with ships. Every able-bodied man for miles was pressed into the Queen's service. Most went willingly. They knew this for the crisis of their lives. On land they built a chain of bonfires to herald the arrival of the Spanish. Anxious eyes scanned the skies morning and evening for the long-awaited red glow which would mean the Spanish sails had been sighted.

Spring passed, the summer flooded the land with golden wheat, bearded barley, flies, moon daisies, and blood-red shivering tides of poppies. The churches were crowded each Sunday. Children sang insulting rhymes about the King of Spain, men in ale houses made lewd jokes about him, jokes with a bitter tang which brought forth gales of wild, anxious laughter.

Mall sewed her samplers and learned her prayers. Nan bent frowning over her books. Lady Fytton wrote long letters to her two sons, far away now in Sir Thomas Egerton's household, learning to be gentlemen. It was the custom to send the sons of gentlemen into a great house to learn their manners, but Lady Fytton missed her boys. A large part of her day was given over to the writing of letters. The Fyttons corresponded copiously with each other, writing gossip and family news, business details and advice at length.

Sir Edward rode out daily in discharge of his war duties. The men of Cheshire were on a war footing. By law each man was enjoined to practise his warlike acts on the village green after church on Sundays, and as they walked back to Gawsworth under the lime trees lining the park walk, they could hear the shouts of the men on the green, the clash of their pikes, the hiss of arrows passing to and fro. Mall had slipped up to the

church loft to see the pikes standing in a corner, the old chest full of arrows and other weapons. Gawsworth was small and remote, but like all England beyond it was ready should the enemy come within bowshot.

July came in with storms. The hay-makers hastened as they cut, tossed and turned the sweet-smelling grass which must feed the culled herds all winter. The village boys stood round with staves to kill the conies as they bolted for safety. A heap of bloody, stiffening little bodies were brought in to the Gawsworth kitchens, and Coney Pie made a welcome change to Pigeon Pie on the table that week. The people worked with sacks over their heads in the streaming rain, scything and stacking, while the lightning played over the trees and the low rumble of thunder had a menacing ring.

Mall's mind was filled with terrors she dared not mention to Nan. She often awoke in the night and lay staring through the bedcurtains at the moonlight, melted silver streaming down the chamber walls. On such moonlit nights the men of England did not sleep, watching the bright sky for that other, ruddier glow which would mean that the nightmare had begun in earnest.

It was on the moonlit night of July 19th, that the men of Devon sighted the Spaniards at last, sailing over the rim of the world, their great ships rising out of the waves like moving castles, the galleons keeping a crescent formation. The moonlight had been an omen. The news spread like wildfire. A deadly moon now sailed against England.

The beacons leapt up towards the sky. Men in distant hamlets saw them and ran, shouting hoarsely, to ring church bells. Half-dressed and with white faces, the people rushed to the church lofts in village after village to seize a pike, a bow or any other weapon. Gentlemen dressed and came from their great houses to assume command. The great of England whistled up their armies of liveried retainers to follow them.

Gawsworth was as busy as anywhere. Lady Fytton and her maids rolled bandages, hid valuables, prepared food, while Sir Edward and every able-bodied man mustered for the manor's defence.

"We must pray our seamen hold them," Sir Edward told his wife as he snatched a hasty meal at noon next day.

"We have the greatest sailors in the world," said Mall, speaking before she had thought. "They will fight like devils for the Queen."

Lady Fytton turned a wrathful eye, but Sir Edward laughed and said, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, wife! Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings."

"You should not encourage her," Lady Fytton snapped. "What do you know of it, pray, Miss? Sit properly when you eat and do not lean your elbow upon the table."

"I heard Lord Howard talk of it at Nan's wedding," Mall said, a year older, a year bolder. From guilt her attitude to her mother had turned to resentment. She thought of a young man who had said to her Remember me, and said aloud, "Our cousin Leveson will be fighting with the fleet. He will not let the Spanish pass."

Her father smiled at her warmly. "True, my love. Have you finished your meat? Then, off to your schoolroom and pray that Lord Howard is right in his judgement of our English sailors."

As she closed the heavy oak door behind her, she heard him say with a sigh, "Ah, if we all had a child's faith! I wish matters were as simple as she believes!"

Sitting in her schoolroom she stared out over green Cheshire fields. What had he meant? That God was not fighting for England? The preacher had said he would. Surely the Spanish would never come here to Gawsworth? She knew what such a coming would mean. Had she not heard of Protestants burnt in market places in Queen Mary's reign, the black-robed priests persecuting the righteous?

She shivered at the prospect of choosing martyrdom or a return to the Catholic faith. The Fyttons were Protestant by birth and inclination. Their hearts as well as their heads dictated their religion. Under Queen Elizabeth it was politic to support the Established Church, although until recently, she had not persecuted men for their faith as her sister had. The Fyttons, however, believed in the Reformation, they loathed and feared the church of Rome. Their hard-headed common sense rejected all the mystique of images, incense, the idolisation of saints. God was a Fytton, to them, an elevated member of their tribe; able to give and receive favours, make deals, accept the code by which they lived with all that it implied of patronage, profit and personal honour.

Mall knew of Catholicism only what she had been taught by those opposed to it. Closing her eyes she almost smelt the smoke, the odour of burning flesh, heard the screams of the

dying, as dark-visaged Spaniards over-ran the land. She put her thin little fingers over her eyes as if to shut out the dreadful images her imagination conjured up.

Nan joined her and silently clasped her fingers. The sisters sat together, praying.

It was an anticlimax to go to bed that night, unaware of what was happening down south. Mall was sure she would never sleep, but she did.

A week passed. News came at irregular intervals, contradictory, puzzling, sometimes good, sometimes bad. All spare food and kindling were hidden. The animals were driven into the hills to hide. The Spanish should get nothing if they arrived.

"I'll burn the manor down rather than see it given up to the Spanish," Sir Edward swore. He laid plans to fire the fields, still heavy with wheat and barley, at the first news of a Spanish advance in that direction.

By the end of the month all England knew that God had indeed been fighting on their side. The moon of the Armada had been shattered, as the reflection of the moon is shattered, as it floats upon the surface of a stream, when a stone is dropped upon it, breaking the silver crescent into a thousand glittering fragments. The English galleys chased the top-heavy Spanish ships around the kingdom until they were wrecked on the west coast of Ireland. Bodies of Spanish soldiers washed to and fro with the tides. Driftwood carved and gilded with alien names littered the English beaches. Children picked them up and ran off with them, cherishing them as treasures.

The crisis over, the Queen behaved as usual, ceasing to pay her seamen. Dysentery broke out in the English ships. Men who had lived through the bitter fighting died in degradation in the streets, put ashore to safeguard the others, weeping pitifully, lacking food, covering, medicine. Weeks of waiting cramped up in tiny ships with poor food and bad water took their toll.

Sir Edward raged against the Queen. "These men fought like lions for her and now she lets them die like beggars in the streets!"

Mall's eyes pricked with tears, thinking of Richard.

Lady Fytton's face was grim. "Even Lord Howard has spent money to buy comforts for his men, and he, God help us, a Papist!"

"A Papist," Mall cried in disbelief.

Sir Edward looked at her in surprise. It was so unusual for her to speak in her mother's presence. "Aye," he said kindly. "Did you not know?"

"Lord Howard?" Mall repeated incredulously.

"Lord Howard of Effingham," Sir Edward nodded. "Though they say the Queen means to raise him to an earldom for his courage during the battle."

"But he is the Queen's cousin, and Lord High Admiral!"

"Aye, well, he is an Englishman, despite his religion, and the Queen knows he puts his country before all else. The Howards held to the old religion even against King Henry. They make no show of it, and the Queen has shown that he may be trusted by sending him against the Spanish fleet."

Was it possible then, she thought, to be an Englishman and a Catholic? Her family had taught her that the two were opposites. Yet she remembered the respect with which the Fytton men had listened to Lord Howard at Nan's wedding. It had never entered her head that he could be anything but a good Protestant. Her world turned topsy-turvey at the very idea. She remembered how her father had said to her mother, "I wish matters were as simple as she believes . . ." Had he secretly doubted Lord Howard's loyalty? Had, perhaps, even the Queen not been completely certain of him?

If quiet-spoken, powerful Lord Howard could be a Catholic then the sermons preached against Rome had to be taken with a pinch of salt. For the first time, Mall began to ask questions about what she was told.

A few days later, with the August sun browning the grass in the park and the cattle sheltering from the noontide heat, Sir Edward read aloud to them a letter from Great-Uncle Francis, who had been in the south during the crisis and had seen the Armada pass before his very eyes as he stood on the cliffs at Dover. Battered by winds, riddled with shot from English galleys, he had pitied the Spaniards as they were driven like helpless sheep before the wind along the east coast.

Her ears pricked suddenly at the name Leveson. She looked up from her sewing, her hands stilled.

"Young Dick Leveson sailed in the *Ark Royal*, wife. Francis says the lad fought well, came through with just a scratch. They will be very proud at Lillieshall."

"Where is Lillieshall, father?" Mall ventured.

"Shropshire, child. It is where the Levesons live. A fine manor. Dick will not go in want, although, having made such a fair match he will have well-lined pockets all his life, I daresay." His eyes dreamed on Mall's face. "One day we shall make you as fine a marriage, child."

Lady Fytton stirred irritably. "First make one for our sons. Ned and Dick need wives before you look for a husband for a ten-year-old girl."

"I have not neglected my sons," said Sir Edward easily. "I've someone in mind for Ned. He's sixteen now, he'll soon be of an age to wed."

His wife looked round the room, her eyes brightening. "Now that all danger's past, we must think to the future."

It was a miracle that there was a future now, all fear having been drowned with the Spanish galleons. Services of thanksgiving were held throughout the kingdom. The Queen struck medals to mark the victory and the seamen's diseased bodies were hastily buried in paupers' graves.

Once more the quiet ticking of the clock marked out Mall's days at Gawsworth. Nan blossomed out gradually, leaving the schoolroom behind. She began to accompany her parents when they rode off to visit relatives or make the long journey to London to pay court to the great men around the Queen or hasten county business which so often got bogged down in the machinery of government. During these absences Mall never knew whether to be glad or sorry—glad because her mother's cold eye was withdrawn from her, or sorry because the house grew so quiet and dull without the mainspring of their lives.

Two years passed. Sir Edward was irritable over money matters. He had successfully begged to be granted a large slice of Irish lands, seized from the rebellious Earl of Desmond in 1587, but his hopes of making a fortune from his new acquisition had gradually faded as delays and troubles with Irish tenants mounted month by month. He wrote to Lord Burleigh pleading to be allowed to delay paying the rent he owed for the leasehold of this land, and angrily swore that Ireland was a graveyard of many a man's hopes. Had not his own father perished over there?

"I wish I had never heard of Ireland," he told them. "It has been nothing but disaster for our family."

One of his brothers, their Uncle Alexander, was living in County Limerick, serving in the Army over there. Sir Edward

wrote to him, pointing out that, as he was on the spot, Alexander could easily find out the truth of the situation, but Alexander was not eager to venture on to Desmond lands on such business. Let Edward come himself, he replied.

Rumours of plots against the Queen mounted. The puritan faction at court grew stronger. Ned, visiting London, wrote home to say that even the theatres were threatened by the city as cesspits of vice and plague. He had hastened to see several plays before the theatres were closed down, and he had managed to see an execution, of which he sent the more grisly details.

"Time he was married," Lady Fytton said again. "Time he settled down."

Ned was eighteen now and would soon have done with education. He came home that winter, a tall, broad handsome boy with a taste in fine clothes and eyes that smiled and teased his sisters. Closeted alone with them in the old schoolroom he confided that he was in love with a girl he had met at Sir John Egerton's house.

"Who is she?" cried Nan excitedly.

Ned smiled. "Her name is the same as yours—Anna. Her father is a Welsh gentleman, Master Barrett of Tenby in Pembrokeshire."

Nan looked at him in dismay. "A Welshman! Oh, Ned, you know Father would never hear of you marrying a Welsh girl."

Between the men of Cheshire and the Welsh lay an old feud, based on cattle raids across the border, with the wrong equal on both sides.

Ned set his mouth mulishly. "Oh, Father! He clings to his old attitudes, but Anna is an heiress, and you know that that will weigh with him."

"She would need to be a very rich heiress to satisfy our Father," Nan said anxiously.

Ned looked aside. "She is rich enough."

"For you," Nan guessed. "But not for Father. Ned, you have not set your heart on her? Father has plans for a very different match for you. He will not lightly forgive you if you upset them."

"I've given Anna my oath," Ned said stubbornly.

Mall listened quietly, looking from one to the other. Nan looked so like their mother, her kind eyes slightly irritated, as though she wished Ned had not fallen in love so inconveniently. Nan had had the good fortune to love where she married. To

her it was a simple enough matter. Ned's love for this Welsh girl did not suit the family, so he must love where they chose. Mall remembered Richard Leveson saying "Love is a madness . . ." She wondered with secret amusement what Nan would have made of that remark.

Lady Fytton called Nan and she bustled out, her full skirts brushing the doorposts. She had put on weight in the last year. Her sweet tooth urged her to eat too much of puddings. Her ruddy face looked like a full moon above her small, household ruff.

Ned moodily stared out of the windows. Remembering Mall's still, silent presence, he glanced at her. "Nan will not tell my secret, will she?"

Mall shook her head confidently. "No, never."

"And you?" Ned asked, smiling.

"Of course not," Mall breathed.

Ned gave her a quick, arrogant, careless smile. "Do you think me a fool, Mall, to fight my Father over this?"

"You must do what you feel is right," Mall said. "Someone said to me once that love is a madness which is incurable . . ."

Ned laughed in astonishment. "Who on earth said that to you, a little girl of your age?"

"I am as old as Nan was when she married John," Mall pointed out.

"I suppose you are," Ned said slowly. "You look so much younger because you are small and delicate. Nan was always old for her age." He eyed her more soberly. "Who told you about love, Mall?"

"Richard Leveson," she said, reluctant to admit it. The brief conversation in the garden on that long-ago wedding day had taken on for her a talismanic importance.

"Ah," Ned said, grimacing. "Poor Dick."

"Poor Dick?" Mall frowned. She was accustomed to hear her family envy him his good fortune. Ned's remark puzzled her.

"Did you not know? His wife, the Lady Margaret, has fits of madness when she knows no one, not even Dick. They may have to shut her up one day. She grows violent when the mood is on her."

Mall was horrified, remembering the beautiful, strange face. "Poor lady, why has it happened?"

"They say it began when she miscarried of a child. Her blood was poisoned and she was quite mad for a few days,

then she recovered, but she has never been the same since."

Mall thought of Richard's thin, young features, his fox-red hair and warm eyes as he told her that love was a madness. Had he sensed Margaret's precariously balanced mind to be in danger? Had her wild, strange eyes warned him from the beginning that their love might end in this horror?

"Poor Dick," she murmured.

"Yes," Ned agreed. "I pity him. His marvellous marriage has turned sour. They say there will be no children from it now. If he goes near her, the lady screams as though he were a monster."

"And he would not force her," Mall said softly. "He is too gentle."

Ned looked at her in fresh astonishment. "You're too precocious, Mall. Where have you learnt such talk?"

She laughed, then, her dark eyes slanting up at him in sudden amusement. "What? Brought up on Gawsworth where every serving man knows me? Did you never sit in the kitchen and use your ears, Ned? Do you think love is confined to the gentlefolk? In the kitchens and the stables they talk of little else."

Ned grinned. "Best not let our mother hear you say so or you'll be forbidden to see or speak to a servant again."

She looked scornful, her small nose turned up. "I'm not a fool, Ned."

"No," he said. "You're not." He flung himself down on the windowseat and stared out into the park. "Somehow I have to persuade my father to let me wed Anna. I cannot bear the thought of any other wife."

"I would not tell him just now, Ned. He's anxious about money. This is the worst time you could choose. Wait a while until a better time arrives."

Ned sighed. "Anna will weep. I hate to see her lovely eyes marred with tears." He leaned his head against the window, his handsome features drawn. Anna Barrett was a small, dark pretty girl with eyes the colour of cornflowers. Spoilt by her father, she was given to soft weeping when her will was crossed. She knew just how to wheedle a soft-hearted young man. Ned was wax in her small hands. Under the hypnotic gaze of the blue eyes wet with tears he would promise anything to see her smile at him again. Ned had had life all his own way until he met her. His own looks and family background had made him popular with the opposite sex, he

had Gawsworth as his inheritance and parents who doted on him. His gay, cheerful nature inclined him to catch at the easiest way in everything he did. Now he came up for the first time against an immovable object, and he was helpless.

Mall felt a great pity for him, poor Ned, outwardly so strong and vigorous, yet she sensed intuitively with an inward lack, a hollow man; all health and ruddy good looks with no strength to support him. She was curious about his Anna. What sort of girl was she? Would she have the strength Ned lacked? He would need a wife of iron will. Watching his face, she felt a hundred years older than him; her mind already more mature, more seasoned, perhaps because her childhood had been darkened by her mother's enmity and, having learned to stand alone so early, she had grown fast.

"If I must, I'll marry without my father's blessing," he cried in smothered anger, yet glanced uneasily at the door as he spoke.

"You are too young," she pointed out. "You will have to wait until you are twenty-one."

He sprang off the windowsill and stalked up and down the room, his eyes those of an animal in a trap. His hunger for Anna's small, soft body drove him, yet he feared what it would bring. "Oh, Christ," he groaned. "I cannot wait so long." Three years to wait before he could slake his thirst and drink deep of the promise in those cornflower eyes? He would go mad before three years were up.

"Be patient," Mall advised pityingly.

He left Gawsworth after Christmas to return to London without having broached the matter of Anna to his parents who, all unaware of what was brewing, were deep in negotiations for his marriage to another girl. They did not feel it necessary at this stage to tell Ned of their plans. He would obey them, of course. That was his duty, and it never entered their heads to doubt his obedience. As the heir to Gawsworth Ned must have a suitable bride and, since property married property, his feelings had nothing to do with it.

That spring Ned went off to Ireland to serve in the Army for a few months alongside his Uncle Alexander. His letters were rare, brief polite little epistles which told them nothing. Mall suspected that he wrote copiously to Anna and had no time left to waste on writing to his parents. Lady Fytton was ill-pleased to have her son's life ventured in the country

which had taken his grandfather's life, but a military training was essential, and the boy chose Ireland himself.

Anna Barrett's family were as unaware of what was afoot as the Fyttons, although Anna knew very well that they would not be angry with the match, since it would be a greater one than they could hope for her. Until Ned had talked his parents round, though, Anna held her tongue. She had a secretive nature, shrewd and ambitious in a way which Ned had never understood, and, although she desired him for his fresh good looks, his inheritance weighed heavily in the balance. Any premature disclosure of their love might destroy her hopes, so she nursed her secret in silence.

Ned's letters came to her by a third party, a young man who had also been educated at Sir John Egerton's and whose sister was Anna's dearest friend. The frequency with which the two girls corresponded did not go unnoticed, but Anna's mother merely smiled. Young girls had sudden, close friendships, she said. It did no harm and kept Anna contented. After one of her friend's letters she was cheerful and helpful, but any prolonged silence reduced her to a pale shadow of herself. It was sometimes dull at Tenby. Anna missed London and its gaiety. When she was married, she would have plenty to occupy her, but for the present, let her write to her friend.

Had she seen the enclosed letters from Ned Fytton she would have been shocked and alarmed, but she was too indulgent to ask to read them. Anna kept them in a secret hiding-place, tied with ribbon, and read and re-read them endlessly, her flushed face and hungry eyes bearing witness to the physical excitement Ned's words aroused in her. Away in rainy Ireland he wrote out his passion, the words almost burning the paper he wrote upon, and kept their love alive where it might otherwise have died a natural death.

Alexander Fytton tried to persuade the boy to accompany him to certain houses where English soldiers found a costly pleasure with pretty local girls, but Ned refused haughtily, to his Uncle's great amusement. "I'll not take the pox like that," Ned said, thinking of Anna. He would not go into marriage unclean.

At midsummer in 1591 the Fytton family rode into Chester to see the summer pageant, a spectacular affair, with giants and strange beasts passing through the narrow city streets; unicorns, camels, dragons and elephants bearing castles from which little naked cupids shot gilded, blunted arrows into the

boisterous crowd. The waites danced into the crowd playing hautboys, cornets and recorders, begging for money with a long-handled wooden bowl thrust at each watcher. The morris dancers jingled and flapped their beribboned hands. Every wagon glittered with tin foil, silver and gold and the people made a roistering, noisy audience. Jugs of ale came out continually. Men staggered and belched. Women danced along with the waites and sang, lifting their skirts and revealing their legs in a manner which shocked the more sober citizens.

Many on the Chester council wished to see the end of the show. They had already forbidden the Guilds to put on the Mystery Plays which had been so popular once, and they were determined to stamp out the Midsummer Show too. Each year it was the occasion for outbreaks of lawlessness, drunken folly and lechery. The pagan roots of the pageant went down deep into the hearts of the people, however, and they clung to this last remnant of their dying traditions.

Mall saw in Chester what she had seen in London, the rootless vagrants in their rags begging for alms, crowded into hovels at the back of the city. The new Poor Laws gave the magistrates more power to punish wandering paupers. Passing the stocks, Mall saw a poor man being whipped while his wife and children wept silently beside him. He would be sent back to his own manor afterwards, her father said with satisfaction, Men must be taught to stay in the place God ordained for them, not to wander off to encumber other cities with their problems.

As they rode back to Gawsworth, Mall dwelt happily on what she had seen. Pleasures were few and far between on their remote manor. The annual fair at Macclesfield usually drew them out for a visit, but it was a small affair compared with Chester's pageant. Pedlars, herbalists and entertainers always visited each fair, but since it attracted so many pickpockets and tricksters her father rarely stayed long, merely going there to meet other Cheshire men. For the children there were gingerbread stalls, bull baiting, cock fighting and other sports to watch while their fathers talked. Pleasure was suspect to the more puritanic, and any excuse was seized to have the fair banned. One year it was an outbreak of sickness, another it was because of threat of war. This shadow over the fairs meant that the people were more unruly during them than they might have been. Ale flowed freely. Men quarrelled and fought. Sometimes a man died. But to Mall a fair meant

only a brief taste of the freedom and gaiety she had first known at Nan's wedding, and she looked forward to fair days with hungry longing.

John visited Gawsworth that Christmas to stay for a week, and Nan was all eagerness to see him. They had seen each other rarely in the four years since their marriage. John was now living at Arbury, learning to govern his estate, but the land was so encumbered still that Sir Edward had to maintain John's household out of his own pocket.

Now twenty-one, John had matured considerably with the years. Together, he and Nan were like an old-married couple. They spent quiet hours reading and talking over the fire, content in each other's company.

"I renewed the fencing this summer," John murmured as Mall lit the candles and closed the shutters.

"Did it cost as much as you feared?" Nan asked, having heard all about his plans from letters that year.

John sighed. "Yes, I had to dig deep into my pocket, but it was necessary to stop the cattle from straying. The grass was poor this year and too many died as it is, I cannot afford to lose any through bad fencing."

Mall pursed her lips to stop herself from smiling. Nan at seventeen was a woman already deep in middle-age; sensible, cheerful, contented. Not for Nan the fevers and dreams of passion. She loved her John calmly and took life as it came. Her marriage had turned out to be as sound as a hazelnut, sweet and firm within the shell of custom.

Mall sat down in her little corner, took up her sewing and stared dreamily into the blue flames of the apple-wood fire. She was fourteen now, still slightly built and with that deceiving pallor, and she knew that she would never be satisfied with the sort of marriage Nan had made. She had forgotten her dread of childbirth as time passed and she forgot Moll Weaver's death. But she had not forgotten Richard Leveson and his Margaret. Their tragic love glimmered in her dreams of the future. It did not frighten her. Something in her own nature responded to the eerie gleam of that elusive happiness. Denied affection as a child, forced into her own thoughts for company, she nourished a growing hunger for love which might one day be prepared to pay any price, however disastrous, for the joy of satisfying itself. The wildness and grief of Richard's marriage excited her. It had a glamour lacking in Nan's marriage. Adolescence stung continually, awaking in

her strange desires and fancies. She was almost bewildered by them, driven like a cow stung by gadflies. She had learnt to hide her thoughts from her mother, and now from Nan, since Nan would never understand them. How could she when Mall did not understand herself? Twisting beneath the surface of her quiet face the convolutions of her hunger grew ever more entwined.

Nan looked across at her and smiled. "Why, Mall? What troubles you? You look like a lost soul in your corner. Come nearer the fire. John, make room for her. Poor Mall, do you feel left out? You must not think we do not love you. There is room enough for you, isn't there, John?"

And John, still eager to be part of a family, still hungry for his own place in a stable world, said quickly, "Yes, Mall. Come nearer. What are you making? Another shirt for Dick?"

Drawn into their quiet circle, Mall put aside her own darker thoughts for a while and played the child again for Nan's sake, but she knew it for a game she would not play much longer.

Before John returned to his duties at Arbury he spoke to Sir Edward about Nan joining him. "I'd have my wife at home with me soon, sir. We have been wed four years and more. I'm no longer a boy and Arbury shapes better every month. I am grateful for all that you have done to help me, but I shall be happier when I am master of my own with Nan in my house to rule it as its mistress."

Sir Edward clapped him on the shoulder. "The sentiment does you credit, John. I know how you feel, but I still feel Nan is too young."

"My Lady Fytton has trained her well," John said quickly. "She's fit to rule a household now."

Sir Edward smiled, amused. "I hope she is, boy, but that is not my meaning. Look, John, I will not beat about the bush. When a girl weds too soon she is wont to die early. I've seen it often enough. Give Nan a while yet."

John looked at him grimly. "Another year?"

Sir Edward shrugged. "We'll see."

John left Gawsworth in a sullen mood, beginning to suspect Sir Edward of a double game. Did he intend to renounce the marriage in favour of some better match? Such things had happened before. An unconsummated marriage could be broken easily enough if a better prospect came into view, and the Fyttons were ambitious.

The dull, cold winter months of January and February dragged along towards spring. While the fields were knee-deep in snow the two Fytton girls were closeted in the house. Bored with winter food; with cabbage soup and salt beef, pigeon pie and porridge, they sat over the fire and yearned for spring.

With spring came news that shattered the family peace. Ned wrote to tell them he meant to marry Anna Barrett, with or without their consent. Sir Edward was so enraged that Mall, watching him bellow until the rafters rang with his deep voice, thought he must die of apoplexy. His face burnt dark red, his eyes were bloodshot like a bull's.

Lady Fytton was distressed. Ambitious as she was, she loved her sons, and Ned's desperation breathed in every line of his letter. She watched her husband, looking for some weakness in him that she could exploit for Ned's benefit. When they disagreed about something she always knew how to change his mind and turn him to her way of thinking. A judicious mixture of wheedling, coaxing, weeping, rating, would bring him round in time.

But this time Sir Edward's pride was wounded. He was so well advanced in his marriage negotiations that Ned's letter came as a terrible shock to him. He remembered the documents drawn up for Ned to sign, with the string of names of his manors: Bechton, Lostock, Graham, Pownall, Macclesfield, Siddington, Capesthorne, Selston, in all of these he had houses, as well as owning the manors of Aldford and Alderley. He had sat staring at the impressive list of properties with a calm face beneath which warm pride had glowed. So far his family had advanced! And how much farther should they rise! Ned's marriage would have been another step upward, but if the boy married this Welsh nobody all would be lost.

"I'll see him dead at my feet first!" His reddened eyes shot fire at his wife. "You knew of this, My Lady!"

"No, no," she cried anxiously, frightened by his face.

Her fear spoke for her. He relaxed slightly. "Well, I shall write to him and tell him to come home at once. Not one penny piece shall he get from me until he returns to his bounden obedience as my son. I'll do nothing for him, nothing, if he marries this girl!"

Nan and Mall listened as their father roared. They had thought Ned might have forgotten Anna while he was away in Ireland, but now, it seemed, he was back in England and more set than ever on marrying her.

In Tenby Ned lay in a snug four-poster bed with Anna, his mouth muzzling her naked throat, their limbs entwined smoothly after a bout of wild love-making which had left both wearily relaxed. Her dark hair flowed across the pillow, her eyes stared unwinkingly into the dark.

"What if your parents will not relent?" she asked him, stroking his ruffled hair.

"I do not care," he muttered, sliding a hot mouth to her small, hard-nippled breasts.

Her hand moved softly over his curls. She began to sing under her breath, a wild Welsh air with words incomprehensible to him. Softly, he tongued her nipple, his hands bold on her spread thighs. She broke off singing to laugh silently.

"Again, Ned? Are you not tired?"

"Of you? Never," he said thickly.

She gave a stifled moan as he crushed down upon her, then bit at his ear, whispering, "How shall we live if your family will not come round?"

"Like gypsies in the hedgerow," he said gaily. "I'll make pegs out of hazel-wood and you shall sell them door to door, and we'll eat hedgehog roast in clay by our fire at night, then we'll lie in the ditch and mate like foxes under the stars."

"Yes," she gasped, moving under him. "Oh, yes . . ."

But later when he slept she lay quietly beside him and her wide, cornflower eyes were hard as stones between their lashes. So she was not good enough for the high-and-mighty Fyttons? Ned's easy charm and looks were not enough to make life bearable if his family proved immovable. If they do not change their minds, she thought, I'll make them pay for every moment of anxiety I suffer. They shall not treat me like this and get away with it. Sooner or later they must accept her, for Ned was heir to Gawsworth. They could not alter that. She slid a small hand down her warm flesh and pressed the slight swell of her belly. God willing there would soon be reason enough for them to change their minds. Once she was bearing Ned's child they would be brought to heel, and then she would have the whip hand over their proud heads. By God, she thought, I'll use it, too.

CHAPTER THREE

GAWSWORTH WAS LIKE a coney field set thick with snares. Ned's disobedience attacked his father's manhood, his authority over them all, and Sir Edward was driven to re-establish his rule by all the means in his power. He was so angry that he made life unbearable for everyone around him.

"What will Ned do?" Lady Fytton asked Nan anxiously. "He must come to terms with his father. How else will he live? He needs money, a house, security. God's teeth, but your father is a hard man. Ned has been wrong, I grant you, but he is young, and he's in love. The girl encouraged him, I daresay. Egged him on. But she is of good birth, she is a gentlewoman. It might be worse. Young men have made marriages to offend their families before." She broke off her torrent of hurried words with a deep, thick sigh. "Nan, Nan, what am I to do between them? I'm distracted. Torn between my husband and my son. Both Fyttons, both in black defiance."

Nan did not say what she thought, which was that Ned had behaved like a lovesick fool. So she patted her mother's arm and murmured gently, "They'll come round in time. They always have. They are too much alike, that is the trouble." When Fytton clashed with Fytton the battlefield was strewn with casualties and Nan did not mean to be one of them. Get over hard ground as lightly as possible, she thought. She would have thought her mother would have learnt better after a lifetime with Sir Edward. He had always been a warm, kindly man except when his sense of honour was touched, his plans for his family questioned. Ned could not have offended him more than by refusing to fall in with his plans. Sir Edward was conscious of having been a generous father to all his children. All the more reason why they should, for their part, be obedient to his wishes. It was little to ask, he considered. What were children but the foot soldiers of an

army bound for conquest? His dreams of seeing Ned's lands doubled by a good marriage lay in ruins around him, and since Ned was out of his reach, he took his revenge on everyone else in the household. The servants, the family, all suffered. The food was sent back to the kitchen as uneatable. The dogs were kicked. Lady Fytton herself came under attack. The usual order was reversed. Normally, Lady Fytton governed the manor with a rod of iron. Now Sir Edward's black rage was the only factor to be considered.

Bright, flaming June made the air heady with the scent of flowers; the cuckoos called deceptively from deep within the park, there were lady smocks and toadflax among the grass beneath the hedges, the blue sky shimmered day after day without a cloud to mar its surface. To escape Sir Edward's wrath, Nan and Mall took their sewing out of doors and sat beneath the elms, talking as they stitched at shifts. Lady Fytton came hurrying across the grass, her face flushed.

"We are going to London tomorrow. To see Lord Burleigh."

Nan laid down her sewing. "Lord Burleigh?"

"He has written to invite us to visit him at Windsor. There is plague in the city again and the court has left St. James's." Her dark eyes were bright. "He has summoned Ned, too."

"This is your doing, Mother," Nan guessed.

"Yes, I wrote to the old man and told him about Ned's folly."

"What if Ned refuses to come?"

"Refuse to come when the Queen's chief minister summons him? Ned would not be so stupid!"

"Would he not?" Nan murmured wryly.

Lady Fytton wrung her hands. "Oh, how I wish he had never met this girl. I can guess what she is like . . . a sly, pretty scheming girl. The kind that can eat the heart out of a man."

"She must be clever, certainly, to get Ned to marry her," said Nan. "He has had enough experience of women. He was no green boy."

Lady Fytton's dark eyes flashed. "What sort of parents must she have to permit it? I would not have allowed a child of mine to marry in such a case."

"No doubt these Barretts are well pleased with the match. Ned is a catch for their girl."

Lady Fytton swore softly beneath her breath. Nan and Mall

exchanged looks of amazement. They had rarely heard their mother use such language.

"It is so unjust," Lady Fytton half sobbed. "All we ever wanted was to give you children a good start in life! Everything goes wrong . . . your father-in-law turns out to be a spendthrift, the Irish lands are not worth a penny and now Ned ruins our plans for a marriage that would have made amends for everything!"

Nan put an arm around her, embarrassed by this display of weakness by one who had always been so strong. "Never mind, Mother. Father must make peace with Ned in the end. After all, Ned will be the next master of Gawsworth. His marriage cannot alter that."

"For Christ's sake do not say that to your father or you will be sorry," gasped Lady Fytton. "He does not relish being reminded that one day he must die, especially since Ned has married to spite him! Oh, why did this have to happen? Ned has always been his darling. Now the way your father talks, the boy is become his worst enemy."

"Father's pride is wounded," said Nan.

"Wounded or no, he must forgive Ned. The boy is desperate. He was written me such a letter! I am afraid of what he will do if Sir Edward does not forgive him. He talks of going back to Ireland to rejoin the army. I know he will be killed if he goes back there. Those barbarians are like savage animals."

When Sir Edward read Lord Burleigh's letter he went into a fit of ungovernable rage. "You wrote to him about this? Are you mad? The whole court will know by now. Every man I've ever injured will thank God on his knees for my humiliation. Ned has given my enemies a weapon to use against me, and by God, if I know them, they'll use it!" White-lipped, he glared at her. "Well, I shall never forgive him, let Lord Burleigh say what he will! I curse Ned and his Welsh whore. May they never bring a child into the world! May they live together like cats in a sack, scratching and biting all their days!"

"For Christ's sake, husband, do not say such things! Ned is our own son, whatever he may do."

"He is your son, not mine! Never mine again!"

"You do not mean that!"

"I mean every word," said Sir Edward, grinding his teeth. "When you do that you look just like your father! Oh, you Fyttons are as savage as the barbarian Irish!"

"Why do you defend him then? Do you think I do not see that you make yourself his accomplice, just as you have always done, pandering to his whims? When he was a child it was sweetmeats, now it is whores, but whatever he desires he must have, it seems. You see no wrong in him."

"I love Ned," she cried miserably. "I am his mother."

"And my wife! My wife above all else, remember. You must choose between him and me. You cannot side with both."

She burst out wildly, "It is this Welsh witch who has lured the boy away, it is she whom you should blame, not Ned! What else but witchcraft is it? He was always a good, obedient boy until now. She has woven spells around him, trapped him in a wicked net . . ."

Sir Edward stared at her. "Witchcraft . . ." His eyes narrowed. "If it could be proved so, we could have the marriage dissolved . . ."

Their father clutched at straws, thought Mall. He could not truly believe Ned's wife to be a witch. The only spell she had cast on Ned was the allure of blue eyes and a shapely body, and to such things Ned had always been an easy victim. Ever since she had noticed anything, she had known Ned for a womaniser. The only difference was that Anna had resisted Ned's attempts to seduce her so that, driven by his desire for her, he had had to marry her. Had she been a serving wench Ned would have taken her by force, no doubt, and then, his lust slaked, gone his way cheerfully. Ned had been spoilt from childhood, his pleasures easily come by, and now he was paying for it.

Their journey seemed shorter to Mall. They made fast time over dry summer roads, with no great puddles to delay them, no potholes in which a horse could catch his foot. Sensible men did not journey in winter, putting off all but essential business until the warmer weather came, and in consequence the roads south were crowded.

When they arrived at Windsor the inns were full of courtiers who could beg no place at the castle, but Lord Burleigh, despite his other duties, had arranged for them to have rooms in a local house. Lady Fytton sighed at the low, poky apartments assigned to them, but said no word of complaint for fear of irritating her husband.

Sir Edward went out to visit friends. Lady Fytton began to bully her servants over the dinner they were to prepare. Nan

and Mall sat in the room they were sharing with the maids, who slept on rough truckle beds with coarse linen, which were pushed under the great bed during the day. Mall knelt on the windowsill and stared down into the busy street to watch the constant comings and goings.

Her casual, wandering eye fell suddenly on a dark red head which seemed familiar. Richard Leveson, she thought, a poignant pleasure in the recognition. Her black eyes searched his lean, hard face, as if the tragedy of his marriage must be written there for all to read, but he was laughing at something the man with him had said, and she only saw the vibrant energy in his eyes and thin features. As if he sensed her intent stare, he glanced upward. She wondered if he would recognise her. His brown eyes slid over her curiously. The skinny dark changeling was growing up fast. Her green damascene gown with its full spreading skirts and the pleated, starched ruff framing her small face, put five years on her age, and the black hair framed features full of quick intelligence. As Richard's eyes slowly returned to meet her own she felt deep consciousness of him—their meeting at the wedding all those years ago had stayed buried within her mind at so intense a level that the years between seemed to her but the flicker of a candle flame. Suddenly he smiled, a wry, teasing, charming smile, bowing. She shot back from the window, feeling sharp pain. He did not remember her, she thought. That had been the light, flirtatious recognition of a stranger, and his failure to know her stung.

A few moments later Dick tapped on the door and was admitted. He kissed them casually and flung himself down on their bed. "Good journey? God help us, but my father makes heavy weather of this marriage. I have never seen him so angry. Has he been like this long?"

"Ever since Ned's latter arrived telling him he had married Anna," Nan said.

"Why so much fuss? Anna is of good birth and has a fair enough inheritance," Dick said drily. "Our father talks as though she were some girl Ned had picked up at a town fair." He grinned at them. "Guess who I saw in the street. Our cousin Leveson. He is fretting to get off to sea again. These sailors are all the same—flyaway birds with no taste for staying in one place. Just as well his wife is mad, poor soul, or he would surely drive her so."

"How can you talk like that?" Mall was bitterly angry. "Poor Richard . . . and poor Margaret . . ."

Dick scratched himself absently. "This bed is alive with fleas. Did you bring your own mattress?"

"We had enough luggage without that," Nan snapped. "Dick, your shoes are making the coverlet filthy. Get up!"

He gave her a surprised, offended look. "What's the matter now?"

"Men make me sick!" Nan was distressed by her mother's anxiety. Lady Fytton's strength had always held the household together. To see her go to pieces in this crisis made Nan's secure world rock, and instinctively she laid the blame upon the men who, between them, had fomented this family feud.

Softly Mall said, "Nan thinks Ned a fool, yet she loves our mother and hates to see her weep, so she is torn between our mother's view and that which our father holds."

Nan turned to look at her, half offended to hear her feelings so accurately dissected by someone she still thought of as a child.

Dick laughed teasingly. "What? D'you envy Ned, Nan? He wed to please himself—is that it? Is that what you resent in him?"

"Ned had no business to marry without our father's permission. He is the heir to Gawsworth and he owed it to the family to marry wisely." Nan's round cheeks were flushed. Her dark eyes burned with irritation. "How is it that women must always do their duty, but men think they may do as they please?"

Dick shrugged. "Women are formed differently. They look for security in marriage. They do not need passion."

Nan looked disgusted. "How dare you talk of such things to us? If my mother heard you, she would wash out your mouth with soap!"

A tap at the door interrupted them before Dick could retort. Nan jumped. "Come in!" Her voice shook slightly. She was so on edge that this unlooked for arrival disturbed her further.

A servant peered round the door. "Master Edward Fytton is below, seeking his parents."

Nan drew a harsh breath. "I'll come down," she said hastily. She looked at Dick and Mall. "Pray God he will not be too late to join them at the castle or our father will be angrier than ever."

"He has plenty of time to catch them up," Dick said idly. "Lord Burleigh has many more important calls on his time than settling such domestic squabbles. If I know the court, our parents will have a long wait before they see him."

Nan irritably swished out of the room. Mall smothered a giggle. Dick glanced at her.

"What now?"

"Nan was offended because you made it sound as if Father and Mother were of no account at court."

"Nor are they," Dick shrugged. "Every jumped-up local squire thinks himself important. In Cheshire Father's voice may sound loud, but at court he will find himself one among many."

Dick had changed, Mall thought. The gentle, shy withdrawn boy had become a man. He was wearing his dark hair in curling love locks which strayed over his shoulders like a girl's. His heavily quilted silk doublet was aglitter with thin gilt chains. In one ear he wore a gold earring. Catching her appraising glance, he grinned. "Well, what do you think of my clothes, sweetheart?"

"You look like a wench dressed in her brother's breeches," she said frankly.

Dick looked almost flattered. "All those who follow my Lord Essex wear their hair like this. You should see Lord Southampton. His hair looks like sunlit water as it flows over his shoulders." A rapt look lit his face. "He is the most beautiful creature in the world."

Mall felt a strange quiver deep within herself as she watched her brother's excited face. He spoke of Lord Southampton with the same hungry passion with which Ned had talked of Anna. A queer little smile touched the corners of his mouth as he met her curious eyes.

"What are you thinking, you witch girl? No wonder our lady mother called you her changeling. You have the strangest eyes I ever saw, too knowing by half."

"Tell me about Lord Southampton," she said, the slanting black eyes smiling.

"Tell what? That London is half crazy over him? That he is the patron of poets and players, the toast of the whole court? Half spirit, half man, a creature not of this world . . ."

"And you are in love with him," Mall whispered, aware that she spoke what should not even be thought, yet finding the words on her tongue before she had even realised her mind had framed them.

Dick went white, then red. His eyes shot towards the door, a frantic terror in them. For a moment all was silence. Their breathing was hushed, their bodies frozen like statues. Once as children they had played the game of Statues in the garden, hiding behind the hedges and standing motionless. The first to move was out. Now Mall felt the same tense expectation.

Then Dick let out a long sigh, ragged with emotion. He stared at her, their faces oddly alike in the ill-lit little chamber. Pushing a lock of hair back from his face he bit his lower lip, holding it for a moment between his teeth, then letting it go with a queer half laugh.

"You are too young to know what you have just said!" His tone was gently disparaging.

She smiled crookedly at him, her random leap at the truth becoming solid in her mind. She felt with every nerve in her body that her intuition was well-founded. She had once touched on Plato with her tutor, long ago. Her brief taste of the classics had left her with half-digested notions of that pagan world, one of which was a vague impression of the possibility of love between men.

"I am not too young to recognise the look of love," she said softly.

Dick looked struck by the expression. "The look of love," he murmured. "Yes, every man who looks on him wears the same expression. He is Adonis . . ."

She recognised the allusion and laughed. "The beloved of Venus?"

Dick shot her a quick look. "Sharp child. You'll cut yourself. One of the players in Lord Strange's company has written some part of a long poem about Venus and Adonis which he means to dedicate to Harry."

"Harry?"

"My lord Southampton," Dick explained casually, his off-hand manner scarcely disguising his satisfaction in being on Christian name terms with one of the nobility. "A pity the theatres are closed because of the plague or I could take you to see a performance."

"I doubt our mother would permit it," she said regretfully.

"Oh, we would find a way," Dick shrugged. "Lord Strange's company are on the roads, touring Canterbury and down west to Bath, they hope. They are closing the Rose for the summer on the order of the authorities. The bearpits are closed, too, for the same reason."

"Do you go to the theatre often?" she asked.

"As often as I can afford," he told her. "I have many friends among the players."

She was shocked. Players were rakish, wild-living men who consorted with whores and strutted about the streets in gentlemen's clothing pretending to a gentility they did not possess. Sir Edward was hot against them on this ground. By their pretence of gentility, he held, they attempted to deceive honest men. How was one to know a gentleman if such mimicry were permitted? In the old days, he said, it was against the law for anyone to dress above his station, and he put down much of the lawlessness in London to this new fashion.

"And does Lord Southampton befriend them, too?" she asked incredulously. Why else would one of them write poems for him?

"Harry is always with them, aye," said Dick, liking to speak the name, saying it softly with moist lips, his eyes gleaming with secret passion.

Ned and Dick were both bewitched, it seemed, she thought wryly. Would their parents recognise Dick's bewitchment, though? Or would they be blinded by their desire for him to rise in the world and see in his close companionship with Lord Southampton merely a praiseworthy ambition? This strange love of his must be so far beyond their knowledge of life that it would never enter their heads to suspect it. It would never have entered her own head but for a flash of intuition and a distant memory of Plato.

Dick talked on of the theatre, and she saw that this was the witchcraft which had first drawn him into the circle he now inhabited. He had met some players in a tavern and made acquaintance with them.

"They were playing at the Rose in Southwark, near the Bear Garden, Mall. We drank deep that night and were chased home by the watch. Next night I met them there again, and so it began. Oh, if you knew the dullness of my life until that meeting you would understand. Their minds are quick and alive. They talk and fight and love passionately." His thin face was fired with eagerness. "They are alive. Most men are dead but not buried."

"Our father hates the players," she pointed out.

"He is one of these Puritan bigots," Dick retorted. "Now,

Lord Southampton values their wit. He sees beneath their low birth to their beauty of soul."

Mall eyed him thoughtfully. It seemed to her that the beauty Dick admired was not of the soul, and she suspected that the same applied to Lord Southampton.

"The finest poet in London today is called Kit Marlowe," Dick said hungrily. "A Cambridge man who writes for the players. His plays set your soul on fire, but his verse is as sweet as nectar . . ."

Something in his voice prompted her to ask, "And is he as beautiful as Lord Southampton?"

Dick's glance was quick and sly. "What has that to do with anything?"

"How should I know?" she retorted, meeting his glance coolly.

Dick's skin flushed. "You are only a little girl, Mall. You know nothing of life but what you have learnt at home in Cheshire, where each day follows the day before like raindrops on a window, chasing each other endlessly without reason or purpose."

"I've seen the cows put to bull and the ewes put to the ram," she said coarsely. "There is a purpose and a reason to that, Dick."

He looked sickly. "Watch that loose tongue of yours, child, or our mother will whip you."

"She does not whip me now," Mall said. It was true. Lady Fytton had ceased to whip her a year back, perhaps because the last time Mall had been bent to the whipping stool, her dark eyes had spat a silent contempt sideways up at her mother, making a red mark stand out on Lady Fytton's round cheeks. The whip had been laid on viciously then, but there had never been another occasion. Of late it had been Lady Fytton's tongue which lashed out, not her hand, and Mall had learnt to close her ears to what she did not wish to hear. That was easier than bearing stripes upon one's back.

"Perhaps she should whip you more often, then," Dick said viciously. There was a petulant droop to his lower lip as he spoke.

She looked at him through her lashes. "It seems to me there are two kinds of love, brother—one quiet and calm, like Nan's for her John, which is how most folk understand the word; the other all fire and a madness in the blood. I wonder which I will have." She wound a coil of hair around her little

finger and bit the strands thoughtfully, a frown creasing her white brows. "I wonder which I would wish to have . . ."

Dick stared at her in dumb astonishment for a moment. Then he said gravely, speaking as one equal to another, his patronising tone quite gone, "Oh, that is easily answered."

She looked at him enquiringly.

"We all find what we seek, even if we do not know we seek it."

Her eyes grew sombre. "A bitter thought."

"How so?"

"If we do not know what we seek we may not know when we have found it."

Dick gave a little laugh of agreement. "True, but it seems to me that what the heart desires it will take when it does find, because it cannot help itself. It is a hart driven by cruel hounds, hunted by necessity."

She laughed. "I see you have acquired the fashionable love of punning. Uncle Francis and our father's friend Sir William Knollys embellish their letters with these curlicues of language."

Dick smiled. "Uncle Francis is a good old man. He has been kind to me."

She asked tentatively, "Does he know? About . . . you?"

Dick met her eyes calmly. "He knows everything. Under that quiet exterior he has a quick brain."

"What does he think?" She was curious to know.

"He is too much the gentleman to say," Dick shrugged.

"Yes," she could imagine that. "Uncle Francis is both kind and tolerant, I remember. Ned could have done worse than ask him to intercede with our father."

"Ned is too proud and too much a fool. He will regret this marriage soon enough."

"He would have regretted it more had he closed his heart to her, I think," said Mall, remembering Ned's desperation when he spoke to her of Anna.

Dick stared at her, narrow-eyed. "How do you know so much, Mall? Nan is not so knowing."

"People forget that I am there and say things they would never say to Nan," she said softly, smiling.

"You are a dangerous girl," Dick grinned.

Their eyes fenced.

"Yet I would trust you," he added thoughtfully.

"You may," she assured him.

"Our mother was right when she distrusted you," Dick murmured. "You are a changeling."

Her lids lowered. Her mouth turned down at the corners. "Our mother hates me."

Dick sucked in his breath and did not argue. He leaned over and put a hand on hers, patting her gently. "I remember as a child you were always at the whipping stool, poor little Mall."

She laughed then. "Not now," she said. "And never again."

"God help our mother when you are full grown," Dick said piously, one eye cocked to see her laugh.

The door opened and Nan, like a whirlwind, came into the chamber. Her full cheeks were hot as fire, her eyes full of little sparks of rage.

"What now?" Dick asked in mock alarm. "You look as if someone has trodden on your foot, sister Nan."

"She was with him," Nan heaved, her hands held bosom high, linked tight together, as though to stem their trembling.

"She?" Dick was puzzled, but Mall's quick mind leapt to the solution.

"Anna? Where is she? You have not left her alone, Nan?"

"She went to the castle with Ned," Nan said thickly. "Oh, it is worse, far worse than I had dreaded . . . she is . . ." She shuddered. "Oh, I cannot even frame the words!"

"Nan, what do you mean, for Christ Jesu's sake?" Mall cried, dazed by her sister's sick expression. Was Ned's new wife a low, common creature? What else could bring that look into Nan's eyes? Horror and shame shone out of them.

Nan stared at her unseeingly. "God help us all," she said.

Mall leapt at her and shook her by the arms. "Tell us!"

Nan sat down suddenly as if her legs gave way beneath her. Slowly, like a child reciting a lesson learnt by rote, she said, "When I went down she was there with Ned. I was dazzled at first by the gown she wore. I hardly saw her face for staring at the gilded damascene and the ropes of pearls and thinking that she must be a richer heiress than our father had feared."

"Well, that is good," said Mall quickly.

Nan looked at her, shaking her head. "You have not seen her. She is lovely, child. Quite lovely, just as Ned claimed. But what Ned does not see is the serpent beneath the flowers. To me she showed it while Ned went to see to the caring of

their horses. She smiled at me, as an angel might, and then out of that pretty mouth came such words as turned my very stomach." She wrung her hands. "Oh, not foul words! They would have been clean by contrast. No, she said very softly that we would regret our treatment to her to our dying days, and she would make a living hell of Gawsworth for all of us, for we could not but accept her, seeing she carried Ned's heir."

Mall thought wryly that she herself might well have thought, if not said, such things. It was Nan's innocence which made Anna's threats so menacing. Aloud, she said, "Easy words, Nan. You must forgive her. If she is with child, no doubt she is distraught, and no wonder, making such a journey on such an errand! Doubtless, she hates us at present, but she will come round."

Nan shook her head, her face set. "You have not seen her," she repeated. "She is . . . a viper. The poison shoots forth so softly that at first you find it hard to believe you are infected, but then it begins to work in you . . . I felt sick as I stumbled away."

Dick had been silent all this while, his thin face intent. Mall turned and looked at him questioningly.

"Nan is right," he said quietly. "Ned's too infatuated to see it, but Nan is right. I've met Anna. She seeks out the weak spot in everyone she meets and aims her poisonous darts at that."

Nan looked at him, then, her black eyes glazed with horror, their glance travelling over him, from his curled love locks to his fine white hands. "Do you know what she said to me of you, brother?" Her voice was sick, quivering. "Do you know what she accused you of to me?" She broke off, covering her face with her hands and rocking to and fro. "Oh, she is evil, evil . . ."

Dick's eyes met Mall's and a long silence filled the chamber. Mall moved to touch Dick's hand gently, gesturing to the door. He rose, a sigh wrenching at him, and quietly left.

Nan looked up as the door closed. Her eyes widened and a wail quavered from her mouth. "Oh, Dick! Oh, my poor mother!"

Mall knelt and put her arms around Nan's plump shoulders, rocking her like a baby. "Hush, sister, hush."

"What shall we do? Mall, I tell you, to have her at

Gawsworth will be like having a viper loose about the house . . . She will infect us all with her poison."

Mall nodded. "Then we must cut out her fangs, sister."

Nan half laughed, half groaned. "Oh, you are still a child!"

"I am fourteen, older than you were when you married John," Mall said. "You thought yourself a woman then, remember?"

Nan sighed. "So I did. How long ago it seems!"

"You should be living at Arbury, not at home," Mall said. "Our father must be forced to send you to your husband. Your place is there now."

"How can I leave our mother at this time?" Nan pointed out.

"Well, we will see," Mall said. "Lie down and sleep for a while, Nan. You need rest."

"Lie down in the middle of a day?" Nan was shocked. "I have to supervise the preparation of supper!" She bustled to the door, setting her hair to rights with an automatic gesture of her hand. Mall watched, a wry smile on her lips. Nan was right. Only in keeping busy could she put aside her anxiety.

Dick returned, hearing Nan's footsteps departing, and stood in the doorway, a tense frown knitting his brows. "Well?"

"Nan asked no questions," Mall told him. "Which means she knew Anna spoke the truth."

Dick shivered. She watched him compassionately. "Now my parents will know, too," he said, his eyes fixed on the window as though he searched the sky for help. "If only there was a way to silence her!"

"We must fight fire with fire," Mall said.

"But how?" Dick was helpless in the face of disaster.

"You said Anna finds the weakness in one and aims for that."

"Yes."

"Even Anna must have a weak spot. We must find it out."

"Easily said," he sighed.

"Tell me what you know of her!"

"Little enough—she's clever, cunning, ambitious . . ."

"That much I know without having met her, fool!"

Dick walked to and fro restlessly. Once he halted and said thoughtfully, "There was one thing . . . a serving boy I met in London . . ." His face flushed as he met Mall's eyes, but he went on, "He had been at Tenby as a child, he knew the Barretts, and he said Anna was once rumoured to have deal-

ing with local witches, probably poor old women accused for want of other mischief by jealous housewives who want occupation! It is usually so. You remember old Jennet at Gawsworth who was tried as a witch because she had a squint and was held to be bewitching the cattle as she looked across the field? I took no note of it when he spoke . . ." Again he flushed, looking down. "I had other things on my mind at the time."

Mall put out a hand and touched his arm gently. "Brother, do not tremble like a whipped child. There is no need to excuse yourself to me."

"No?" He looked up slowly.

Their eyes met. Mall smiled at him. "When I was a child I wanted love from any quarter. I understand."

"I think you do," he said huskily. "We are all marred, are we not, Mall? I sometimes think it is because our mother governed us so strictly. I have had a fear of women all my life."

Mall nodded. "At least she loved you. Me she hated. Perhaps if I knew why it would not matter, but I've never known . . ." She shook herself free of the old, clogging misery. "Well, never mind. To return to Anna, it matters little whether this gossip were true or false, what matters is it was widely rumoured, or a serving lad would not know of it."

"But if you accuse Anna of it, it will make more trouble!" he said doubtfully.

She smiled, her eyes affectionately amused. "Slow wits! I'll not be so crude. If Anna has any guilt, it will show at a hint, and a hint is all I'll risk. Wait and see . . ."

The waiting was long. The bright June day wound slowly down to dusk. Blue-black shadows etched themselves across the house walls and fell heavily over the street, the house martins twittered in the eaves, the clatter of the streets grew hushed as men withdrew into their houses before the curfew. An odour of roasting meat made the air savoury. Pans clashed in the kitchen. Nan's voice rated the serving wenches. The watch marched past with their pikes over their shoulders and their lanterns unlit as yet.

A stir in the street heralded the return of their parents. Mall flew to the window to peer down. By lantern light she saw their father, erect and bare-headed, arm Lady Fytton over the dusty cobbles into the house. Ned and a girl came behind

them. Ned was bent solicitously over his wife, and all that could be seen of her was the darkness of her hair and her damascened skirts.

Ned's cloak blew out in the wind as they entered the house. Mall looked round at Dick.

"Will you come into the parlour set aside for us, or stay here until you are sent for?"

His face went white as marble. His eyes suffered. She felt a pang of pity for him, and with pity an affection she had not known she felt.

"I'll come," he said.

She took his hand and squeezed it. It cost him much to make that decision, she thought. She knew he dreaded the first meeting with his parents, that moment when he would see from their faces how much Anna had told them.

But as they turned to go, the door opened and Nan stood there, stiff as one of the carved statues in the church at Gawsworth, her face set in cold lines.

She stood aside and a girl entered with light steps. Mall stared for the first time at Anna, her brother's wife.

Slender and curved, her dark head carried like a flower on the white stem of her long neck, she caught the eye, stirring a swift, unbidden admiration. Then details leapt out. The hard blue of the eyes, the arrogant nose, the spite in the pink mouth.

"You must be Mall," Anna said softly. "The changeling . . ." It was meant to wound.

Mall laughed, tensed to do battle. "You must be Anna, the Welsh witch . . ." she retorted.

On the last word a flash came from the blue eyes. "What did you say?" The words were spoken menacingly.

"Be careful, Anna," Mall said sweetly. "Changelings learn strange secrets."

Anna's eyes searched hers. A faint line touched the white smoothness of that lovely forehead. Mall felt a quiver of triumph. She saw she had somehow found a chink in that bright armour. Could it possibly be true? Could Anna have dabbled in some black art? A shaft at random had touched, it seemed. Intuition again proved its value.

"Mall, will you see that Anna has all she needs?" Nan asked heavily. "I must go down to see to the serving of supper."

Dick moved towards the door in her wake. Anna turned to him, smiling again.

"Why, brother Dick! How pretty you look! I must not forget to tell your father how much Lord Southampton values your company!"

Dick made no answer. Like a rabbit bolting for cover, he was gone, and Anna's high, sweet laughter trilled out. She turned to give Mall a measuring glance. "Did you know your brother was my lord's mignon?" Her eyes lanced Mall's face. "Are you proud to have a mignon in the family?"

"Oh, we are a strange family," Mall said. "A changeling and a mignon . . . now a whore and a witch is added to us."

Anna's breath drew fiercely. She whirled across the room to slap Mall's face, but as her hand shot out Mall ducked, then caught her hand, digging her nails into the white flesh.

"Oh, no!" she hissed. "You strike me at your peril, *sister*. Let us speak clearly." She glanced at Anna's slightly swelling belly. "If you want that which you carry to be born alive, hear me well."

Anna froze, her eyes slanting.

"My mother and father may hate you, but they would never harm that child you carry, not would poor Nan. They are too good. But I am of your own kind, I fancy. I will do anything I think necessary, and if you wish to live you will hold your poisonous tongue and shield my parents from knowing what I do not wish they should know."

Anna slowly smiled. "And if I do not?"

Mall shrugged. "The stairs at Gawsworth are steep. Any woman heavy with child might slip and fall to her death."

"Oh, I shall be very careful," Anna promised softly.

"You know how many other dangers lurk," Mall said lightly. "If the mind is turned to it . . . foxglove in your broth, or perhaps some juice of nightshade in a compote of blackcurrants by chance . . . and there are herbs which abort a child, they say, and wrack the mother with dreadful pains . . ."

Anna's blue eyes were fixed on her face, searching the very depths of her soul. "You threaten wildly, child," she said, attempting to laugh carelessly. "Why, do you think such a thing could happen and no consequence follow? Do you know what happens to those who commit such crimes? Torture, execution . . . you would pray God to release you from your agony."

Mall's face did not move. Calmly, she said, "In Cheshire my father governs the law, sister. He would decide whether a death were accident or no. And my old nurse is skilled with herbs. It is a simple matter to make death seem a tragic chance.

"You would," Mall said, with confidence. "Why not I?"

The reply drained all the colour from Anna's face. She swayed on her feet. "I?" The one word held an agonised question. "Why do you believe such things of me?" The cornflower eyes watched her closely.

"I read it in your face, perhaps," Mall shrugged. "Or perhaps I have heard gossip . . ."

"Gossip?" Anna was as tense as a hunted fox.

"My family have friends everywhere," Mall said, wondering what Anna feared. What unknown gossip was there to be discovered in Pembrokeshire that could bring white fear into Anna's face? Whatever it was, it seemed to be having the desired effect upon her.

Anna sat down suddenly. "What do you want of me?"

"Only that you lay aside your enmity to my family and make my brother a good wife," Mall said.

"I love Ned," Anna muttered.

"I am glad, for so do I, and his wife would find me a good friend if she proved herself worthy of his love."

Anna stared at her. "How old are you, changeling?"

"Fourteen," Mall said.

"A dangerous age," Anna murmured. A flickering movement rippled across her face, like the shadow of the sun across a deep pool. "When I was fourteen . . ." She broke off, sucking in her breath. "Well, no matter." She looked up. "If I may trust you, sister, you may trust me."

Mall held her glance. After a moment she held out her hand, and they touched fingers.

Anna gave a light, high laugh. "That is settled, then?" She laid her hands across her belly. "I carry him high. That means he is a boy."

"I pray God it is so," Mall said, as she had heard her mother say often.

Anna relaxed. "Lord Burleigh has made peace between Ned and your father, and we are to have a manor of our own until such time as Gawsworth passes to Ned."

"Is Ned content?"

"Ned is relieved to have the matter settled," Anna said, with a sort of scorn. "He likes life easy."

"Men do," Mall said. She shot Anna a glance. "You have not told my parents about Dick yet?"

Anna shook her head. "Not yet, and never will now." She shuddered slightly. "I dislike men of that sort, though. They are unnatural."

"He is my brother," Mall said. "That is enough for me."

Anna nodded. "Does Ned have the same loyalty?"

"I understand why he wed you," Mall answered directly. "I understand the power love can have . . ."

Anna's strange blue eyes surveyed her. "You will have power enough of that sort one day, I fancy. Use it. Women have few paths to power. Their bodies give them their best chance. Ambition is reckoned noble in a man, but when a woman desires to rise in the world she is thought to be unwomanly because she uses the only instrument God gave her, her body. Men make this world, they make its laws, and they are ruthless in applying them to women. We must be cunning, devious and ruthless in our turn if we are not to be treated as chattels."

"You are right," Mall said fiercely. She felt again a strange rapport with her new sister-in-law. It had been this understanding which made it possible for her to defeat Anna with her own weapons. Yet Mall felt sympathy for her. Anna had only done the best for herself. Had Ned succeeded in seducing her, what would have happened to her and her child? Her family would have cast her off. She would have been disgraced, abandoned to her fate. Society was cruel to women who stepped outside the conventions which bound them. In a man immorality was reckoned mere youthful sport. A woman was punished hard for it. It was unjust.

"Come down to supper, sister," Mall said, smiling, and extending a hand.

They went down arm in arm. Nan stared in dumb astonishment to see Anna laughing as the two went into supper. Dick, seated beside his mother, gave Mall a quick, searching anxious look. She winked discreetly at him, and saw his slender body relax as though he had held himself tense for hours in anticipation of a mortal blow which was now averted. It had taken courage for him to sit there, she thought, expecting God knows what.

Ned extended an adoring, protective arm to his wife, who

dutifully went to sit beside him, but patted the form next to her, saying sweetly, "Dearest Mall, sit by me . . ."

Ned, surprised, gave Mall a quick warm look of gratitude. Lady Fytton, stiff and unbending at the other end of the table, looked like someone with a sour taste in her mouth, and Sir Edward knit his brows darkly, avoiding any glance in the direction of his new daughter-in-law.

The meal was served in an atmosphere of bitter tension. Even the servants were gleefully wary as they moved about the room.

Sir Edward drank deep of the wine which his steward, at a nod from my lady, kept replenishing in his glass.

He ate little, but gradually the wine took its effect and a deep flush mounted in his cheeks, loosening his stiff tongue. Leaning forward suddenly, he smiled at Mall. "Why, we'd forgot! News for you, daughter! My Lord of Burleigh has promised to find you a place at court as Maid of Honour to her Grace when you are of a proper age to go from home!" He leaned back, his glass in his hand, watching her face.

Her heart leapt. "Maid of Honour to the Queen? Oh . . ." She clasped her hands tightly, aware her mother watched her. Risking a swift glance, she saw the unyielding bitterness marking those features, the hardness of the eyes, the tightness of the mouth which had never spoken kindly to her and never would.

"It was the price of Ned's forgiveness," Lady Fytton said abruptly. "My lord offered it as a bribe."

Sir Edward's flush deepened. He glared at his wife. "William Knollys has been pleading Mall's case for months. It was our turn to have a court appointment in the family." His nostrils flared. "It might have been Ned's had he not wrecked all our plans. I'd set my heart on a post for him." His mouth twisted. "Well, Mall has her chance now. We must hope she uses it wisely. She will never have a better chance of making a good marriage. The court is the marriage market of England. Mark me, girl! You'll be seen by all who matter in this kingdom. Do not waste your chances. I look for much from this!"

Dick stretched his foot across beneath the table and kicked her gently. She looked at him. He grinned, delighted. Ned was smiling, too, warmed towards her by her kindness to his unwelcome wife.

Nan rose to come and kiss her, bending over her, cheek

rubbing affectionately against cheek. There was no envy in Nan's nature. Generous, content, she was merely pleased by Mall's good luck.

Anna, too, gave her a little smiling glance, whispering, "Seize your chance, Mall. Seize it with both hands. Remember what I said! Men make the rules but women can still win the game if they are clever!"

She finished her meal, absorbed in thought, hardly hearing her father's voice as he talked of the future which lay ahead for her. Of all those in this chamber, only her own mother could not bring herself to join in the rejoicing. She hates me so much, Mall thought, with a taste of bitter gall in her mouth. What have I ever done to bring about such hatred? The injustice of it burnt in her soul. She was hardly able to enjoy the prospect of court life with such dark memories dominating her thoughts. All the cruelties of childhood seemed to rise up inside her, all the hours of weeping and loneliness, the sense of isolation.

She longed for love, any love, with the passionate hunger of starvation.

CHAPTER FOUR

"A PORTRAIT OF US?" Mall laid down her book, her face filled with astonishment.

"Father told me this morning," Nan nodded. "He said it was for John, but I think it was because you are to be Maid of Honour to the Queen. He is so proud of you, Mall dear."

"I wish he did not hope for so much from me," Mall frowned nervously.

"Why, what do you mean?" Nan's round face was filled with puzzled doubt.

"He once had hopes for Dick and Ned, but now he pins it all on me and I am terrified. It is too great a weight to carry." She sighed. She longed to please her father. His love was something she wanted badly, and it made her dizzily happy to see his proud smile when they were together, but she knew too well how high he aspired, and how small was her hope of fulfilling his desire.

"Silly child, what fancies do you harbour now?" Nan asked, hugging her warmly.

"What if I do not make the great marriage Father hopes for?"

Nan patted her cheek. "Never fear, you will be married!" She was amused and touched by Mall's anxiety.

Mall looked at her sadly. Nan's feet were so firmly grounded. She did not understand. "Father will expect a good deal from my marriage. He will not be satisfied with a country knight and a manor or two. He wants much more than that for me."

"You worry over much. You are still so young. You have your life all before you." Nan sighed. "If only Father would let me go to Arbury, if only he would let John and I begin our married life! I am a woman now, not a child. How much longer must we wait?"

"Do you think Father hopes to find you a better husband?" Mall had often suspected it.

Nan looked aghast. "Why do you say that?"

"Why else does he wait?"

"That is what John thinks," Nan admitted miserably. "But I cannot believe Father would break his word. John and I are married, we are husband and wife in the eyes of God and the law. How could Father do anything about that?"

"An unconsummated marriage? Nothing easier," Mall shrugged. "Father is ambitious for us. Don't you see? He dreams of rich marriages, of new lands added to the Fytton holdings. Arbury is not good enough for him."

Nan's face set. "It is good enough for me, and so is John."

The portrait painter, in exile from London because of the plague still raging there despite the slow decline of summer, was difficult to please. Nan wore her gold damascene with the black sleeves, her pansy billiament set on her curls, with all her jewels cascading down her bodice in a glittering flow, and with her he professed himself satisfied, but Mall had no gown of corresponding richness to wear, and only one small necklace which barely showed above her ruff.

"My youngest daughter is still a child," Lady Fytton said with stately hauteur. "Paint her as she is, sir, or be off!"

His beard bristled with indignation. "Your husband paid me to show the young ladies at their best," he snapped. "How can I do so when one of them is dressed for a nursery?"

"Paint them, sir, and hold your tongue!" Lady Fytton would have no insolence from such as he! Yet, misliking what he said because she knew it had some truth in it, she swept from the chamber, head held high, to avoid further confrontation.

The painter stared at the closed door, waggling his beard and muttering beneath his breath.

Mall could not believe her ears. Had he truly said, "Old canting hag?" She looked down, her lips tight to avoid a smile.

The man paced up and down before them, eyeing them. He darted at Nan and twitched her black fan so that it lay at a graceful angle against the richness of her skirts. Then he looked irritably at Mall's empty hands.

"You must hold something! How else may I display the beauty of those small, white hands of yours?" He saw a low vase of pansies on a shelf, crossed to them and plucked a spray from among them. "Hold this!"

Mall looked at the flowers, taking them, their petals like small faces as they fluttered against her fingers. "They are the emblem of my house," she said.

"Then it is fitting," he said indifferently. His left hand moved to flick one of the flowers. "Pretty things."

"They have no scent," she said.

He looked at her, then, his eyes keen. "They should be your flower," he said. "Dark-eyed and fragile. You're too intelligent for your own good."

She stared, astonished.

He laughed and his whole face altered. She saw he was not ill-favoured. "You're young," he shrugged. "What will they make of you? Are you betrothed to some young squire?"

"I am to go to court to be Maid of Honour to Her Grace," she told him proudly.

His brows rose. "Why, then perhaps those wits of yours will not go begging. At court they love quick wits."

Nan looked restlessly at them. She disapproved of Mall's habit of getting into conversation with those of lower station. Nan had only two ways of classing those she met—either they were gentlefolk or they were not, and if not, Nan knew how to speak to them, with the firm assurance of her class. This painter was insolent, she had decided, and Mall should not encourage him.

"When will you begin, sir?" she demanded, in her mother's voice.

He looked at her sharply. "When you hold your tongue, mistress," he retorted.

Nan's cheeks grew red with rage and disbelief. Mall smothered a smile.

He moved to his easel and began to sketch deftly, staring at them from time to time, asking questions, barely seeming to hear the answers, his manner abstracted yet gently curious.

The sound of horses on the dusty road leading from the village sent Nan darting to the window, ignoring the painter's groan of fury. "It is Aunt Bess," she cried excitedly. "Sir Thomas is with her, and another man I do not recognise!" She swirled, dipped a slight curtsy. "You must excuse me, sir. I have to go down to welcome my relatives. Come, Mall . . ." Not even waiting to see Mall obey her, she rushed to the door and was gone, leaving it standing wide.

Mall grimaced at the painter. "I am sorry. We have so few visitors."

"I've done enough for one sitting," he shrugged.

"May I see?"

He drew a cloth over the easel. "No. Not until it is all finished."

"But why not?"

"I find it makes my sitters nervous to see themselves too soon. They grow self-conscious. No one likes their own image. The more faithfully reproduced the less they like it."

She laughed. "Yes, Nan would certainly dislike what she saw. That is true."

"And you?" He watched her curiously, straightening his charcoal sticks.

"I am not sure." She frowned. "I do not like what I see in my mirror, I know that."

He smiled. "Mirrors can lie. The eyes of those who look at you are the best reflection."

"That depends on how they feel towards you," she said, with unwary bitterness.

He was silent, watching her with uncanny shrewdness. "Aye, that is true, too." He began to explain about the panel of wood on which he would ultimately paint the portrait, how the sketches he was doing now were merely the preliminary groundwork. "I am getting the proportions laid down, the likeness established. If I make an error at this stage it need not matter."

She was so fascinated she forgot Aunt Bess and the other unknown visitor, listening with deep attention to what the painter told her. She liked to hear men talk of their work with that intent absorption, just as she liked to watch the grooms working on a horse, their faces close to the animal's flank, their movements customary and assured, the slow sweeping brush of a hand sending a ripple through the muscles of the great silky beast.

When at length she joined the women in the privy parlour she found Aunt Bess already launched on some anecdote, gossip of a London murder for which the guilty lovers had been executed. News of it had only now reached Cheshire, printed in a common penny news-sheet, with a cheap ballad being sung in the markets to publicise it, and Aunt Bess had bought a copy.

"They say this woman was courted by two young men, one of whom was rich and sent her jewels, hoping to wed her. When she would not, he asked for them back, and she scornfully refused, so he had her arrested for the theft of them. She was so afraid, that she agreed to wed him, and they were married at once, but her other lover would not

relinquish his claims on her, and so maddened her that she poisoned her husband with his help. It seems no soul suspected them, and for two years she was his paramour, he scorning to marry her and always taunting her with her husband's murder. When she grew with child she begged him to end her shame, but he would not, and they had such a quarrel that the servants heard all, and one ran to the magistrate and gave them both up." Aunt Bess settled her skirts with a frown of satisfaction. "Well, they were justly served in the end! It would have been ill justice for them to go free of their wickedness."

"What happened to them?" Mall asked.

"The man was hanged first while his paramour watched, then she was burnt in Smithfield!"

It was a dreadful ending, Mall thought, wondering how the woman had felt, watching her lover die before her very eyes and knowing that only the agony of the flames awaited herself. "But if she was with child?" she asked, horrified.

"Oh, they caused her to be delivered of the child quietly in the country first," Aunt Bess nodded. "Poor lamb. What a beginning to a life."

And what an ending, thought Mall, dumb with horror. She thought of the girl, loving one man, but marrying another out of fear, driven to distraction by her lover until she took the only release she could conceive by killing the man who had forced her into unwilling submission.

Aunt Bess looked at her searchingly. "Do not look so sad, sweetheart. It was a wicked pair and richly deserved their death. Now, what is this I hear? You are to go to court? Are you excited?"

"Yes, Aunt," said Mall dutifully, aware of her mother's cold stare.

She knew better than to show any true feeling in that basilisk presence.

"You must be a good girl," Aunt Bess said. "Make your father proud of you. There's many a girl gone to court and made a fine marriage. Learn how to please the gentlemen while never forgetting your modesty and your dignity."

"Yes, Aunt," she said again, eyes cast down.

"Sir Edward hopes for too much," said Lady Fytton icily. "Mary is no beauty. The best we can expect is that she will not disgrace us by forward behaviour."

Aunt Bess looked sideways and pursed her pouting lips.

"Well, sister, there's many a plain bucket been filled to the brim. Mall is beauty enough for me. She has fine eyes and a graceful walk. She'll do well enough."

Lady Fytton said nothing, but her silence was eloquent.

A plain bucket, thought Mall wryly. Well, that was meant kindly, but how it hurt. If I was beautiful, she thought suddenly, I would use my power, as Anna told me to, I would use it as a whip to see men wince as I winced just now. Love, or the lack of it, can do that. Life without love was like meat without salt. She was sick of the taste of it. While she remained at Gawsworth she was in her mother's power, continually wincing under the spur of Lady Fytton's cold dislike. She must get free, escape. More and more the promise of court life glimmered before her like a light at the end of a dark tunnel.

She went up to change for dinner in honour of their visitors. Aunt Bess had come to Gawsworth on family business. Why else did anyone come? Money was the magnet which drew them from home. All the Fyttons were the same.

She had no better gown to wear, but Nan furtively lent her a gold chain, and she put on her best ruff, newly starched by the laundress, and dressed her hair once more.

She was talking eagerly to Nan when they entered the chamber, and the words dried on her tongue as she saw who awaited them. He stood with his back to the window, the sunlight making a halo around the bright filaments of his red hair.

"Here are my jewels," her father cried. "Nan, come here, child, and greet your cousin Richard Leveson."

Nan moved forward, smiling. They touched cheeks. He looked down at her from his great height, his brown eyes warm.

"The last I saw of you, Nan, you were a child bride. So you are still at home? When do you begin your married life?"

Nan looked at Sir Edward, who reddened and made a grumbling sound in his throat.

"Time enough, cousin. Time enough." His eye brightened, falling on Mall, standing very still in the background. "Perhaps when my little Mall goes to court. Both our birds will leave the nest at once!"

Then Richard looked at her. She wore her pale gown with an air, her slight dark head held gracefully on the long white neck. Like a swan, he thought, a black-eyed swan. Then, incongruously, vicious birds, swans, could break a man's arm with one blow.

She came forward slowly, not hurrying. Her skirts swished silkily as she curtsied, the small head bent so that he could only see the black curls.

He bent to lift her. His hands were warm, her fingers icy cold. Before he could speak, Lady Fytton entered the room and greeted him. He released Mall, who moved discreetly to one side, out of her mother's way.

They sat next to each other at table by her father's bidding. "You can tell my little Mall how to behave at court," he said cheerfully. "You know court ways better than anyone."

Richard smiled politely.

"How is your wife?" Lady Fytton asked, her face discreetly sympathetic.

Mall shot a look at his face. For a second a frozen pain showed in his eyes, then he said quietly, "She never leaves home, Lady Fytton."

Mall prayed her mother would not press further questions on him. She need not have feared. There was something about Richard Leveson that silenced even Lady Fytton's tongue.

Over the richly spread table a gabble of voices were raised as they ate. Sir Thomas Holcroft leaned his elbows on the table and gnawed on a chicken leg as he shook his head over the plague. "The court is at Reading now, keeping as far from London as they may, and small wonder. It spreads daily. Some of the outer suburbs are infected. They have forbidden all fairs and markets, so the rest of the country is suddenly alive with pedlars and common cheats cut off from plying their trade in the city."

"They say it is spread by dogs and cats," said Lady Fytton.

"Very like, very like," Sir Thomas nodded. "Dogs are not at home in towns. Myself, I believe town-dwellers should be forbid to keep them. When we were in Blackfriars one summer we were kept awake all night by some hound that howled all the hours of the darkness. I would have shot the beast if I had known where it was . . ."

Mall stifled a giggle. Richard looked down at her and winked. Under cover of a noisy discussion of town ways, he asked, "Do you look forward to life at court?"

"Yes," she said. "It will be better than here."

His eyes were sharp. They saw everything, she thought. "Aye, I believe you."

"Are you still in love with the sea?" she asked.

He smiled and his eyes were bright now. "More than ever. When you look across the great silver mirror of the ocean you feel yourself in tune with the universe. You know your place, you are at one with life." He looked at her thoughtfully. "I remember Mall very well. Did you think I had forgot?"

She shook her head, speechless.

His little finger lightly brushed hers, so briefly it might have been chance. "Had you forgotten me, perhaps? How many years is it? Four?"

"More than five," she said, remembering only too well those moments in the green garden at Stepney.

"So long? All the world was bright then." His face was touched with grim sadness. "How quickly the spring fades."

She wanted to wipe that look out of his eyes. She daringly edged her hand close enough to touch his fingers. "Spring returns each year," she said.

He looked at her, eyes widening. "So it does," he said under his breath. "So it does."

Nan and Aunt Bess sat talking to Lady Fytton in the privy parlour while Sir Edward and Sir Thomas vanished to do their necessary work in Sir Edward's own chamber. Mall stayed to supervise the servants as they cleared the table and washed the utensils. Then she wandered out into the garden to cut rose petals for Cook to crystallise and mount as the decoration on a honey pudding for supper.

A basket on her arm she sauntered from bush to bush, picking the finest petals. They would be steeped in a solution of sugar water until they had absorbed sufficient, then dried carefully in the sun, leaving them stiff as starched linen.

"Mall," a voice whispered.

She stood, looking about.

"Mall! Over here!"

He was looking at her from the ivy-hung dimness of a wicker summerhouse beyond a willow.

She looked back cautiously at the house. The sun winked from the leaded windows, blinding her. After a moment she moved slowly towards the summerhouse.

He was sitting on a low bench, his head back against the wall.

She hesitated, her basket swinging from her arm. He grinned at her, eyes quizzical.

"What's amiss?"

"We may be seen," she pointed out.

He patted the seat. "Come here, little coward."

She approached and sat down. For a while they sat in silence. She was half afraid to speak. They had come too close during the meal. He was still a married man, and she a child by comparison. Fourteen, she thought. It must seem nothing to him. Yet she knew herself a woman in all that mattered. Her isolation in this house had been like a forcing-house for her emotions. She was hungry for love, yet afraid to ask for it for fear of refusal.

"You know about my wife?" he asked suddenly, not looking at her. His strong hands lay tense on his knees as though they would strike given half a chance.

"Yes," she said simply. There was nothing else she could say. Sympathy was not what he wanted.

He curled his hands into fists and struck himself on the thighs. "I loved her once. Now she breeds nothing but sickness in me." He looked at her, his eyes dark. "Have you ever seen a mad woman? She cannot help herself, but she is unclean. They have a hard task getting her to wash or put on clean clothes. Once she was as fresh as you, little Mall, proud of her beauty. Now she lets her hair hang round her face like rat-tails and she stinks like a sewer." He shuddered. "They are not always kind to her. I try to guard her, but I cannot always be there, and she tries their patience."

Tentatively, she put out a hand. His fingers caught at it and held it, stroking her smooth skin. Her pulses leapt like candle flames in a wind.

"Mall, I am cold and weary," he sighed. "If you were not so young I'd come to you for comfort. You have a gentle presence."

There was a hard lump in her throat. Richard, like herself, lacked love, she thought. She thought of his lovely, wild-eyed young bride five years ago and winced with pity for them both. It was a cold world. Fate, like a blind thing, struck suddenly when least expected. How shining had seemed Richard's future to him in that spring of 1587, despite the gathering clouds of war on the horizon. Everyone had envied him his luck. Now the whole world pitied him. To a proud man such a fall must wring his soul.

She lifted his hand slowly and kissed the rough back, laying her cheek against it, feeling the short hairs tickle her skin.

"Mall!" Richard stared, moved beyond expression. He put

his free hand on the silky black head. "My dear child!"

"I am not a child!" she cried. Her head lifted, the long white throat throbbing, the dark eyes passionate.

His eyes dived deep into hers, he groaned deep in his throat. Like iron filings drawn by a magnet he bent slowly forward. Their mouths met, clung. She felt dizzy, her head swimming.

Is this love, she wondered wildly? This quivering sweetness which makes me feel as though my bones had turned to water?

He pushed her away, breathing hard. "Jesu!" He leapt to his feet and moved towards the entrance of the summerhouse. She sat, dazed, waiting.

He gave a short, hard laugh. "I must be going mad!" Then, more softly, "Mall, you are a sweet, generous child. I cannot take advantage of your innocence. Keep yourself for some untouched boy who had never known the terrors of the dark. You deserve better than I can offer you."

She stared at his back while a slow red tide of humiliation washed up her face. "I . . . I am sorry if I embarrassed you," she mumbled on a half sob.

He turned, swearing softly. "Christ, that was not my meaning! Embarrass me? How can you think so?" He stared at her flushed face. "I was tempted to snatch a little warmth from you, child, don't you understand? But for very shame I must let it go. You are so young, too young to realise what follows . . ." He took a deep, hard breath. "Mall, I am married. Married, but always alone. My bed is cold at nights. I can only ever have unlawful pleasures. It is a damnable position for a man to be in . . ." His eyes flicked over her hungrily. "After the coarse flesh of harlots, can you wonder I grabbed at your sweet innocence?"

She shivered, her head averted, then got up and darted towards the sunlight.

He caught her arm and held her, looking down at her. "Child, guard that generous heart of yours or you may ruin your life . . ."

She ran through the rose garden, sickened by the sweet scent of the flowers with their fleshy leaves and gaudy ripeness. Shame churned in her stomach like sour food. When she reached the privy she was violently sick, retching again and again until her muscles ached and she was as empty as a drum.

She lay on her bed in drained silence, watching the summer afternoon light fade and die on the wall.

When Nan came up to find her, she confessed to her sickness and was put to bed like a small child, submitting gratefully to Nan's warm kindness. She did not go down to supper, nor rise next morning for breakfast.

The visitors returned to Vale Royal next morning, and Gawsworth returned to its customary peace.

Each day they sat for the painter for an hour or two, when their work afforded time, and he talked to them as he worked. Mall learnt more of the court from him than she ever had from her family, for he had a shrewd quick wit and an ear for gossip, particularly of the malicious sort, understanding very well the jostlings around the throne between Lord Essex and Sir Robert Cecil, who divided the court into two armed camps. She found a new fascination in contemplating the ambitious plotting of great men.

As summer wore on the news of the plague grew worse. It had spread to Greenwich, and there were fears it would spread along the south bank as far as Deptford, which caused much alarm, since Deptford was essential to the Queen's ships, on whom the whole safety of the kingdom depended. Stringent precautions were taken to safeguard the area. All London was in fear.

In September word reached them of a great scandal. After a battle with the Portugese a great carrack was brought back in triumph to Dartmouth where the local people from the Mayor downwards at once began to despoil the ship of all her precious merchandise.

The Queen was beside herself with fury. Sir Robert Cecil himself was despatched to Dartmouth in haste to stop the pillaging, and Sir Walter Raleigh, currently in the Tower, was sent after him to sit on a Commission to decide to whom the spoils belonged. Sir Walter's influence in the West was accounted necessary to the restoration of law and order. The Portugese made much noise in the courts of Europe, protesting at English piracy, but the Queen, a major shareholder in all English marine ventures, turned a deaf ear. As always, she hoped for the lion's share.

Pedlars spread through the kingdom, their packs redolent of musk taken from the carrack. There was a sudden glut of seed pearls, damask and calico. Sir Robert furiously declared that every man who passed him on the road West had an odour of musk about him. "Every saddle-bag is stuffed to the brim with spoil from the carrack," he wrote to the Queen.

"They say he has placed armed guards on the ship," Sir Edward grunted. "Shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. These Devon men are stubborn thieves. They'll not give up what they have taken now. Every man who could row or even swim has been out to the ship and taken his fill of amber, musk and pearls." He was irritable. Cheshire was too far away for him to be able to partake of the unexpected windfall which had dropped into Devon's lap, and envy made him sour. Those who lived on the coast were often suddenly enriched by such strokes of luck—wrecks thrown up from the sea were accounted legal spoil for every man.

When the portraits were finished the painter draped them with a cloth while a servant went scurrying away to fetch Sir Edward and my lady. Nan and Mall waited, seated demurely on their stools.

The man had not yet been paid. Mall wondered if he were nervous. What if her father did not like the picture?

She looked at the clever, bearded face. He was whistling under his breath as he cleaned his brushes on an old rag, and by the look of him he did not have a care in the world.

Sir Edward came in with quick steps, his chains jingling. Lady Fytton followed in his shadow, erect and unbending. She did not mean to like the portraits, Mall saw that.

The painter glanced round, bowed in a casual manner which left no doubt that he thought himself the equal of anyone in the room, then, with a jerk of his wrist, flung the cloth away, revealing the large panel.

Sir Edward stood back and stared. His eyes widened. Mall watched him, saw his face relax, and knew he liked what he saw. She glanced at her mother, but it was never so easy to read that face.

Nan was staring, growing pink. "My face is not as plump as that!" she protested. Then, awkwardly, "It is well done of you, Mall."

"Thin-faced and pallid as a blancmange? Thank you," Mall said lightly.

Sir Edward cleared his throat. Suddenly Mall saw that he was nervous of the other man. It surprised her.

"It is very well done," he said, smiling stiffly. "I am well pleased. I shall write to my Lord Essex, thanking him for sending you to us."

Then Mall saw, in a flash, that this man was more than just an artisan, one step above a servant, as she knew Nan had

always thought him. He was held in high enough esteem for Sir Edward to wish to please him.

Sir Edward's brow creased. "Wife, Mall should have worn a better gown than that. She looks nothing in it."

"A girl of her age must wear the simplest gowns and few jewels," Lady Fytton answered flatly.

Her husband began to speak, but his words tailed off under her cold eye. "Quite so, quite so," he mumbled unhappily. "It is a good likeness, at least . . ."

The painter listened with a remote, sardonic air. He bowed, accepted Sir Edward's praise, but that dry smile lingered on his clever mouth.

Mall spoke with him before he left for London, his purse of gold tucked safely away in his saddle-bag. He looked at her, his cloak flaring in the chill autumn wind. "I would like to paint you again some day," he said thoughtfully. "When you are come into your own. You are like unhewn marble from which the creation has yet to be freed. One day you will emerge visibly as you are in there . . ." and he tapped her forehead with one thin finger.

Their eyes duelled. She felt a quiver of excitement. Was he flirting with her? He was a clever man and it was his cleverness which fascinated her, so unlike the men she had known hitherto.

He lifted her hand to his mouth, bowing slightly. His lips brushed her skin lightly. Then he turned and mounted, looked down at her with that dry, amused smile.

"I shall look forward to seeing you at court some day, Mistress Mall."

She watched him ride away leaving Gawsworth a quiet, empty shell from which she now waited only for her time of escape.

As autumn drew into winter new hungers flared inside her, moods she did not understand nor know how to control, so that she often snapped at Nan and sulked about the house, her mind and body invaded by hot desires from which there was no release. Sometimes she sat and stared at the Cheshire sky beside her chamber window, watching it sag like a bolster under the weight of rain, until the clouds at last released their burden and straight spears of rain slashed down to earth, beating against the windows while the wind rattled the latches and howled in the chimneys, making the smoke blow out into the rooms. On such days she and Nan had no exercise but their walk in the long gallery, up and down, up and down,

like caged animals, feeling the weight of the house upon their heads as if it would crush them to the ground.

Mall stood beside the chimney, tracing the craved panels of wood which faced it, staring at the iron fireback from Sussex Weald, with its ornaments of birds and flowers and the date 1575 centred in a moulded square. The fluted iron columns of the andirons sturdily held the great logs cut from their estate. Sparks flew out and were extinguished on the tiled hearth.

Some evenings there was music to dance to, played by herself or Nan on the virginals, if there were visitors in the house to dance a pavane or a galliard. Even Lady Fytton would join in the more stately dances, turning with pointed toe and hand held high, a slight smile on her face. But to the girls the jigs were more enjoyable, giving them a chance to work off their unused energy to the gay notes of Mopsy's Tune.

On evenings when they were alone with their parents they sang madrigals in which the servants joined. One of the maids had a sweet, clear voice which hit every note impeccably. Mall loved to hear her sing. Music was her greatest joy, her one consolation for the boredom which increasingly depressed her. She spent hours writing madrigals for the family to sing, and Sir Edward was delighted with her talent.

"The Queen loves music, my Mall. It will please her well to find you so adept." He picked up her gaily beribboned lute and struck the strings idly. "I was no mean performer in my youth," he said nostalgically.

When music palled, they played shove penny or backgammon, or childish card games over which they giggled and cheated each other openly, while the dogs snuffled beside the fire and their mother yawned over her embroidery. On the long table lay broadsides and a little heap of books, popular tales from London, poetry and pastoral romances such as Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, which Mall loved to read.

Despite all these amusements, and her long days of useful occupation set by her mother, time hung heavy on her hands. Nothing held her interest. She felt she was in a limbo of slow time. She seemed to feel the steady tick of the iron clock which stood above the mantelpiece drumming in her blood. Made by the Gawsworth blacksmith it had the Fytton arms engraved upon it and a loud bell which struck on every hour. She listened to it with grim intensity as it measured out her days.

Lady Fytton harried her from dawn to dusk, filling her days with household tasks, her bitter tongue like hail on Mall's

shrivelling spirit, icy words slashing at her constantly. The hatred lay between them always. Mall scarcely knew how she held it back within herself, for now it was a mutual feeling, all her own guilt and longing swamped under a flood tide of resentment at the injustice.

At last she turned upon her, after her mother had threatened her with the long discarded whipping stool.

"I am sure it would give you much pleasure, Madam, to whip me as you did when I was a child," Mall cried bitterly.

Lady Fytton's face grew white. "Pleasure? How dare you? I have only done my duty in correcting your faults, child. My only regret is that it had no effect on your wild, unruly spirit."

"I say it gave you pleasure," Mall gasped, flinging caution to the wind. "You hate me so much you love to see me weep."

"It is not true," her mother whispered, shaking. "Wicked! Hate one's own child? It would be wicked . . ."

Mall almost pitied her then, at the bewilderment and horror in her voice, but she remembered all the years of misery and grief, and her heart hardened. "You have always hated me," she said. "Why? Even as a little child. Why?" Her voice swooped up shrilly. "Even in my cradle, I believe. This feeling of hatred has been between us since I first knew anything. Why?"

Lady Fytton's mouth opened and shut, she gasped like a fish out of water, then suddenly turned on her heel and walked away, leaving Mall the victor on a field on which both combatants had suffered mortal wounds. For a second Mall felt a fierce triumph, as though in outfacing her mother, she had won through to maturity. Then dull pain succeeded it, pain and wringing regret. She felt as though she had had a poisoned limb amputated. For a second came relief, then agony which screamed along her nerves. She realised that secretly she had always hoped one day to reach her mother, see the hatred die out in that stern face. Now she faced the truth that it would never be, and truth was a bitter draught to swallow.

Two days later came a letter from Ned, imploring Mall to come and stay with himself and Anna at their manor of Aldford, lent to them by Sir Edward.

Anna's time was near, she was bored and frightened. She needed companionship, and it was Mall she asked for, he said.

Lady Fytton listened impassively while her husband read the letter. Mall waited, eyes cast down, expecting grim refusal. To her astonishment, her mother said instead, "Why not? It will do Mall good to visit her brother's wife."

But Sir Edward was thinking differently. Slowly, he said, "We will all go. It is fitting we should be there when our first grandchild is born. If it is a boy he will succeed to Gawsworth in due course."

Lady Fytton was surprised. "All of us? Surely that will be a trouble to the girl when she is expecting to give birth at any moment?"

Sir Edward looked at her impatiently. "At such a time she will have need of an older woman, wife."

Lady Fytton's mouth compressed, but she made no further protest. They rode to Aldford in an early flurry of snow. The tiny flakes powdered the horse's ears and made him shake his head. Mall bent to stroke his flank, whispering soothingly. The frozen crystals melted on her face, making it wet as though with tears. She stuck out her tongue to catch them, grinning at Nan sideways.

Anna met them in the smoky hall of the manor house. She was changed, Mall saw. The slight, quick body had thickened and slowed. She made her curtsy, looking at them all in surprise as the servants bustled to and fro with chattering tongues, heaving in their bags and boxes.

"We are all come to be with you, daughter," Sir Edward said jovially, embracing her. "To watch over the birth of our first grandchild."

Over his shoulder Anna looked at Mall, who winked at her discreetly. Anna's face warmed with a smile, then she made a speech of welcome to them all, bidding them make her house their own.

Later she and Mall sat in the privy parlour by a smoking fire while Sir Edward and Ned rode over the fields so that Sir Edward could judge the state of the land, and Nan and Lady Fytton scolded the servants in the kitchen.

"How long it seems to spring," Anna sighed. "I have been thinking all this winter that in spring I would be light of my burden, but the days drag out endlessly."

"How long to the birth?" Mall asked.

A secret smile touched Anna's face. "We were wed in June," she said ambiguously.

Mall's brows lifted.

Anna laughed. "First babes are often born early," she said softly.

Mall's mouth twitched. "So? You risked much."

Anna shrugged. "I risked everything. I had no choice if I wanted to make sure of your brother. He was too frightened of your father to wed me until I carried this . . ." touching her belly.

"If he had not wed you," Mall said, thinking.

Anna's face tightened. "But he did."

"You're altered," Mall said.

"How so?"

Mall shrugged. "Softer, less . . . dangerous . . ."

Anna sighed, contented. "I'm free," she said. "Free of everything but this . . ." again her hand strayed to the swell below her waist. "You know how it is when you are a child in your parents' house. Now I am mistress in my own. I find it sweet."

"Was it for freedom's sake that you dabbled with witchcraft?" Mall asked suddenly.

Anna stiffened. Her eyes flew to Mall's face. "How did you know of that? I have often wondered. Who do you know in Tenby?"

"I heard gossip from a serving lad," Mall said, knowing better than to mention Dick's part in it.

Anna looked pale. "Gossip? Was there much gossip?"

"I think not," Mall reassured her, seeing fear in those cornflower eyes. "And you are far from Wales now."

Anna grimaced. "Not far enough. Such gossip could send me to the stake."

"Your marriage will protect you," Mall said gently. "But if you are wise you will not lay yourself open to accusation again. Why did you do it?"

Anna shrugged. "My nurse was accounted a wise woman, one of the clever ones who can lay spells or cure ills. It was she who took me to the secret covens. I went from boredom and a hunger for power. They have much wisdom, Mall. It is not all wickedness. They know secrets which can cure and kill. I was young. I desired that knowledge, that power. Now I have all I need. Now I want a quiet house and a lapful of babes."

She was as heavy as a sack of apples, Mall thought, all her glittering beauty laid aside unwanted. Brooding over her burden she sat by the fire, contentedly weighted, moving rarely, she who had stepped so light and free before.

Christmas came with revels and mummeries, the snow lying thickly over the ploughed fields and the branching elms. They gave each other gifts of perfume, sweetmeats, handsewn gloves and handkerchieves. Mall had made Sir Edward a new shirt. Nan made him a linen nightshirt frilled with lace at the neck, which made him laugh and say he would be suspected as a woman if he wore it.

They danced while Anna watched, in her corner seat by the fire, her back supported by piled cushions, her feet on a footstall. Sir Edward had insisted she take the master's chair, the high-backed coffer chair which had been made a century before, with its solid, immovable base and carved back, which was too heavy to be lifted and so stayed in its accustomed place year after year by the fire.

The servants giggled and jigged noisily. The steward came to announce the arrival of the mummers from the village, and in they jostled, coughing and shuffling their feet, stamping the snow off their boots. They wore home-made, improvised costumes, some of them of great age and smelling of the chests they had been kept in the rest of the year. Sheepishly they grinned at the assembled audience as their leader launched into the opening words of their play. St. George, in a well-washed white tabard splashed with a red cross, spat on the floor as he began to speak his lines, and Father Christmas poked him with his holly branch reprovingly, making the serving wenches giggle loudly. The incidents of the mumming were well loved and known to everyone, played exactly the same each year, nothing added, nothing taken away, for in that familiarity lay their appeal.

The dragon and the black-faced Saracen were greeted with squeals of mock horror, but one serving wench ran to kiss the Saracen behind Father Christmas, whispering that she knew him to be Job Wheeler and no blackamoor, which threw him into blushing confusion beneath his blacked face.

The comic incidents were the most popular, but the closing singing touched Mall deeply. Country folk they might be, but the mummers had good voices and knew the old tunes well. Everyone joined in the carols, singing the sweet, familiar words joyfully. Tears pricked Mall's eyes. She glanced at Anna, thinking that here was another young mother about to give birth in this snowy Christmas weather.

Well paid, the mummers stamped out to set off to walk around the lesser houses, calling at farms and villages to act

out their play again. The steward served them mulled ale and hot pies before they left, stomachs warmed and spirits lifted by the unlooked for generosity which Sir Edward, mellow with muscatel, had pressed upon them.

The twelve days of Christmas moved on slowly, and on a chill January morning Anna went into labour in the great chamber, her slight hands twisting a knotted rope given to her by the midwife to help her over the pain. Her muffled groans increased during the day. Lady Fytton bustled to and fro, wrapped in absorption. The swaddling clothes baked in front of the fire they had lit in the chamber, ready to receive the babe. Ned brooded in the hall, looking up from time to time with a creased brow. Sir Edward was jovial. He had seen it all before.

"If I had been permitted to join John at Arbury I could be bearing my first child now," Nan said yearningly.

"Your time will come," Mall soothed.

Nan looked at her with a little smile. "Do you remember how you told me you would never marry for fear of dying in childbirth?"

Mall looked at the stairs with a shiver of dread, that old horror coming over her again. "Yes," she said slowly. "I remember."

Anna's voice shrieked suddenly and they were all still, staring upwards, not looking at each other. How was it possible for a human being to bear such pain and live, Mall thought, hearing the stark agony scream out again. Her fingers twisted in the folds of her gown. Coldness crept over her.

Then a new sound wailed on the air and suddenly Ned was on his feet, white as the snow outside.

Sir Edward exhaled a sharp breath of relief. "It is born," he breathed.

A serving wench ran out on the landing and stared down at them, flushed and trembling. "A boy," she sobbed. "A boy . . ."

Tears ran down Ned's cheeks. Sir Edward turned to hug him in both arms, patting his shaking shoulders. "A boy," he boomed. "A boy! Well done."

Mall looked up at the servant. "How is Mistress Fytton?" she asked urgently.

Ned freed himself from his father's arms at the question and turned, too.

The girl smiled broadly. "She is laughing on her pillow," she said cheerfully.

Ned leapt up the stairs three at a time and disappeared into his wife's chamber. They heard the sound of Lady Fytton's scolding voice, then the door swung shut. Nan was sobbing softly, envious of Anna's child. Mall knelt and cuddled her, stroking her hair. Sir Edward looked at them with irritation.

"What is to weep over? All is done. The child is born safely. Nan! Remember yourself, girl."

"I want my own babes," Nan cried bitterly. "I want my own husband and my own home!"

Sir Edward made an angry sound. "Soon enough, soon enough. Must you hurry to your fate?"

"But when?" Nan begged, tears wet on her round cheeks. "Father, when?"

"I have said it shall be when Mall goes to court," he snapped. "Surely you can wait another year or so? Before you start your married life I mean to send you both to a great house for your polishing. How can Mall go to court straight from Gawsworth? She must have six months' training in some great house first. There are many things for her to learn which she cannot learn at home."

Nan's tears dried slowly. "And I am to go, too?"

"I thought it only fair," he shrugged. "You may yet rise in the world. You should have the same training as Mall, and, anyway, Mall would be lonely at first. She will have need of you for a while."

"Where will we go, Father?" Mall asked, excitement churning in her veins.

A look of satisfaction flushed his face. "My Lady of Shrewsbury has consented to admit you to her house of Chatsworth," he said. "She will see you sufficiently educated in the ways of court. She has a grandchild of Nan's age, Arbella, who has tutors and ladies to guide her. You will share Arbella's education."

At last, thought Mall. At last it begins. The great world beyond Gawsworth was opening to her. She would be free.

CHAPTER FIVE

ELIZABETH TALBOT, Countess of Shrewsbury, ran her household as though it were a minor court and she the sovereign of it. Her steward ushered guests into her presence with bows, his white stick of office elegantly held in one hand, his rich black garments sufficient indication of his mistress's power and wealth even before one laid eyes on her. Gentlemen served her on bended knee, young ladies of good birth attended her in a flurry of silk skirts and bent backs. Chatsworth was a palace, richly ornamented, with high glass windows and panelled walls strangely carved with strap work and fantastic heraldic designs, stone fireplaces with great hearths, braziers in the hall at which the servingmen warmed their hands, great high-ceilinged rooms with dark veins of beams running between the creamy plaster. Silks, velvets, tapestries gave colour and warmth to the draughty spaces. Italian chests of walnut gilded and emblazoned held my lady's clothes. Bag chairs plump with cushions stood near the fires. The table was vast, carved with animals and flowers, and even the massive sideboard was heavily ornamented.

After the simplicity of life on Gawsworth, Mall found it strange and exciting to taste this new splendour. For days she could only stare, using her eyes but not her tongue, struck dumb by the sheer magnificence of everything she saw.

The warm, stuffy family life at home had not prepared her for the rituals at Chatsworth, where every task, however mundane, was performed by a host of servants in procession. Lady Shrewsbury's meat went up to her by many hands, passed from one to the other with bows, her steward calling for the way to be cleared on the stairs. She dined in private, as did the Queen, inviting to her table only the few important guests who visited her. The rest of the household dined in the great hall. Silver and crystal decorated her table, each precious piece ornamented and decorated. The great salter stood

in the centre of the table as befitted its ritualistic importance, and my lady's private clergyman said grace in front of it before she ate. A thin-faced man in black then tasted the dishes to which my lady pointed, his task being to make sure no poison lurked within them.

Stiff, upright, sharp-eyed, Lady Shrewsbury missed nothing which happened in her household. Her days were occupied with business connected with her many estates and business ventures. She lent money to her tenants and charged them for the privilege; she kept strict account of every penny spent on her behalf and woe betide anyone who tried to cheat or deceive her. Her wealth was so great, so widely spread, that she had an army of clerks to manage it, but her finger remained firmly on the pulse of all business. Cold, clever, ambitious, she dominated Chatsworth and exuded power.

She had been four times a widow, her last husband, the late Earl, having died in 1590, and each marriage had further enriched her.

Nan and Mall did not see her until they had been resident under her roof for a week. Her chief lady-in-waiting had taken them in hand on their arrival, checking their wardrobes with a sigh of dismay, ordering new gowns and accessories for them, teaching them the exact measure of curtsy with which to greet my lady when they met her, for Lady Shrewsbury expected to be treated with the same regal deferment one would offer to the Queen.

"Do not speak until she first speaks to you," they were warned. "Answer modestly but clearly. She is slightly deaf but she will never admit it, although she is of a great age."

"How old is she?" Mall asked, and was frowned upon for her presumption. Her first awe was wearing off and she was curious about her new dwelling.

"She is fifteen years older than the Queen," the lady-in-waiting replied sternly. "Her age is no concern of yours, however."

Seventy-six, Mall thought, awestruck. A great age, indeed. Few lived to such an age, very few beyond it. She was consumed with curiosity about this powerful old woman in whose hands the great house lay like a dolls' house in the hands of a child.

Each day she saw the messengers leave Chatsworth with packs of letters for London and elsewhere. Lady Shrewsbury wrote letters by the score to all the most important men in the

kingdom. Mall felt the impact of the outer world far more than she had ever done before. At Gawsworth news came slowly and late. The world had little relevance. Here the world was both close and remote, for although Lady Shrewsbury was so powerful that her estates revolved around her alone, she was so ambitious that she made sure of getting news of the court as soon as anything happened. Her dreams were vast, nothing less than to see the crown of England upon the head of her grand-daughter Arbella, orphaned at an early age and left in her care to grow up in the antechamber of the royal presence, hoping always, year after year, to be promised the succession. Arbella was nineteen, a year younger than Nan. Surrounded with state and pomp, never allowed privacy, her hours filled with practising music, dancing, and the lessons which interminably bored and irritated her, she appeared on first sight to be a stiff, jewelled doll without emotions or thoughts of her own.

It surprised and amused Mall, when after a few days, Arbella suddenly burst out with a shrill complaint of her grandmother. They had been granted permission to walk in one of the courts. Two maids dawdled behind them, eyeing the gentlemen whose presence was rarely far from Arbella's side. The Queen's advisers feared the Spanish would try to seize Arbella and convey her abroad where she could be used by Catholics as a cipher for an invasion of England in her name. Lady Shrewsbury made sure that Arbella was never unprotected, even in the midst of her own house.

Out of earshot, though never out of sight, the gentlemen walked behind them, therefore, their hands at their daggers.

"My lady grandmother does me wrong to keep me prisoner thus," Arbella cried suddenly, her face flushed.

Mall stared in astonishment. "Prisoner?"

"What else? I am so guarded, so beset by watchers, that I may not even go to the privy without two men in hearing, which I find so humiliating that I sometimes wait two hours in agony before I can bring myself to go!" Arbella's upper lip was beaded with sweat, Mall noticed, and her fair skin twitched as though worms writhed under it.

It was a weak face, she thought, and reminded her faintly of a rabbit. The thought made her smile, and Arbella, catching the movement of her mouth, whirled on her angrily.

"You laugh? You would not do so if it happened to you! I sleep in her chamber, I eat at her table, I dance, sing, play the

virginals while she watches me . . . I am her thing, a doll without volition, closeted with her day and night and not free to think my own thoughts, choose my own occupations, select my own friends. No prisoner in England is worse off than I . . . "

"Hush," Mall warned, glancing round to see if any of their attendants had heard.

"You see?" Arbella demanded. "Even you begin to feel it! You will feel it more and more as time goes by. Nothing happens in my lady's house that she does not know of, and nothing is thought that she does not approve."

"Your thoughts cannot be watched," Mall pointed out calmly. "It is your words which must be guarded, and that is not surprising since she hopes to see you wear the crown."

Arbella laughed wildly. "I wear it? You do not believe that? Oh, I could be thrice crowned Queen and my lady grandmother would still govern my every word and action. You do not think she would let me rule everything, do you? I should not even have leave to rule myself! I am to be called the Queen, but I know who would rule the kingdom."

Mall watched her curiously. She did not see this half hysterical girl ruling anything. Aloud, she said, "Lady Shrewsbury is very old. One day she will not be here to say you nay."

Arbella's face grew cunning. "I used to believe that, but now I know she is the devil, and will live forever. How else has she contrived to rise so high? She was born of lowly stock, you know. Scarce a gentlewoman, they say. She married at fourteen the first time. Each marriage enriched her further, and each husband has served his turn and died, but she lives on to enjoy their wealth. Nobody even knows how rich she is, but my lady knows. Oh, yes, my lady knows everything."

Is she mad, thought Mall, staring at her? She talks as though she were. Does Lady Shrewsbury know this vein of madness runs in her grand-daughter's veins?

Arbella lowered her voice, glancing round to make certain they were not overheard. "I believe she is a witch," she hissed.

Mall started, and Arbella saw her astonished face with a grim satisfaction.

She nodded. "A witch," she repeated. "How else explain it? She has eyes and ears everywhere. The very rats in the

walls whisper secrets to her." A little smile touched her pale mouth. "But I will cheat her somehow. There must be a way if one is desperate."

And you are desperate, Mall thought. Pity for the girl touched her, but she was wary, too. Arbella in her struggle for freedom could pull down anyone who tried to aid her. There was danger in her very company, and Mall determined not to get involved with her. She remembered what she had heard of the Stuarts; Mary, the executed Queen whose death had brought the Spanish down on English shores, her murdered husband and her son James who sat on Scotland's throne. Unlucky, Sir Edward had always called them. Some families are born unlcky, he said. They brought their ill-luck to everyone who tangled with them. Arbella was a branch of that ill-fated tree. Mall guessed her to be a true branch, weak and unfortunate, a menace to her friends and a joy to her enemies.

After that walk, she took no more exercise with Arbella, despite invitations, but Nan, gentle and compassionate as ever, was happy to accompany the girl, and listened soothingly to all Arbella poured out to her.

Lady Shrewsbury sent for them after dinner one afternoon. The chief lady-in-waiting scurried around them, making them presentable, giving them last-minute instructions on etiquette and warnings of my lady's sharp tongue to any who failed to reach her high standard of decorum.

"Keep your eyes down, curtsy low, speak only when spoken to, answer truthfully but modestly, say as little as may be said respectfully," Mall rattled off in a flicker of irritation. "We know. You have said it all before a thousand times."

A sharp hand slapped her cheek hard, bringing a cry of pain and humiliation.

"And never answer back," the other woman said grimly. "My lady will use her stick if she thinks you impertinent."

They had been warned before of Lady Shrewsbury's habit of striking out with her stick when enraged. They had seen gentlemen emerge with flushed faces, nursing a cracked hand after an interview with her.

The steward announced them in his sonorous tones, bowing himself out backwards as though from the presence of royalty. They advanced, eyes cast down, curtsied before her great chair of state, beneath the canopy embroidered with the Talbot arms, and waited with bent heard for her to speak.

"Come here, Anne," the old woman said in her precise, sharp tones.

Nan nervously approached, not daring to look at her. Lady Shrewsbury put up her stick and raised Nan's head with the end of it, so that Nan looked at her.

Pale and trembling, Nan waited under the beady eyes.

"Hmm," murmured the old lady. "You're married to old Newdegate's heir, I gather. A fine estate, Arbury." For a moment Mall, peeping beneath her lashes, saw a cunning, thoughtful gleam in the old eyes. Did Lady Shrewsbury always look so when land was mentioned? Was her hunger for estates still her consuming passion, unsatisfied even by her vast possessions? "Well, you are a pleasant child. No beauty, but as you're married that is no matter. When will you join your husband?"

"I hope to do so when we leave Chatsworth," Nan said eagerly.

Lady Shrewsbury smiled faintly, a human look which surprised Mall. "D'you love him, child?"

"Oh, yes," Nan breathed.

Lady Shrewsbury sighed. "I was fourteen when I married my first husband. It seems so long ago. I was eager, too." She passed her clawlike hand across her sharp face as though wiping cobwebs away. "Well, no matter." She pushed Nan aside with her stick and looked at Mall, now openly eyeing her.

"Come here, girl. You are Mary?"

"Yes, my lady," Mall said, with another curtsy.

As she rose she met the sharp old eyes. "You are unwed but go to court, it seems?"

"Yes, my lady."

Lady Shrewsbury nodded, chewing her lower lip. She glanced at Nan. "Leave your sister with me, child. I would speak privately to her. She has more to learn than you ever need to know."

Nan gave Mall a pitying, aghast glance, but obediently backed out of the room, curtsying at the door. When she had gone, Lady Shrewsbury pointed to a leather stool near her feet. "Sit there, child."

Mall sat, her skirts spreading around her feet. There was a little silence.

"So you walk no more with Arbella in the private gardens?" Lady Shrewsbury asked suddenly, taking her by surprise.

She looked up, her cheeks reddening.

Lady Shrewsbury smiled grimly. "Oh, nothing happens at Chatsworth that I am not aware of, child! What did she say?"

Mall bit her lip and sought for a tactful answer.

"Shall I guess?" Lady Shrewsbury asked with wry amusement. "She complained I kept her a prisoner and gave her no freedom? She railed against me and begged you to help her? She asked you to convey letters secretly to her other relatives, to the Queen, to the Council?"

"No, no," Mall protested. "She asked me to do none of these things, I swear!"

The old eyes narrowed. "No? Then why did you refuse her other invitations to walk out? Why do you hold aloof from her?"

Mall did not know how to answer. She stared at the floor.

The stick thumped down on her left arm, making her jump and cry out in pain.

"Answer me, girl! I will know!"

Mall looked at her angrily, her black eyes narrowed, her mouth white with rage. "My reasons are my own business, my lady, but since you insist, I tell you truly—I avoid your grand-daughter because I think her a dangerous companion. I wish to pass my time here as easily as I may, I want no part in any plots or wrangles, I want to learn what I came here to learn, the ways of court life. Arbella is discontented, that much you obviously know. Well, it is no business of mine, and I will not be dragged into the matter."

Lady Shrewsbury stared at her, the old face as impassive as the oak panelling behind it. "So," she murmured. "A clever child, a quick child, an ambitious child."

Mall flushed. She felt flattered by the description, and her pleasure softened her towards the old lady. She was already in awe of the enormous power Lady Shrewsbury maintained. Now she felt a personal admiration for her integrity as a human being, too, seeing the strong, austere moulding of her face, the strength of the bone structure beneath the withered flesh, the hard, assertive eyes and tight mouth. Mean she might be, acquisitive she certainly was, but she was a character one could admire.

"Well, you may go," Lady Shrewsbury said. "I think you will be a good student. We can teach you all you need to know here. I've brought the best tutors to teach Arbella." Her mouth twisted. "Like bringing the best leather-workers

to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse, I fear. What is bred in the bone, they say . . . Well, the Stuart blood had ever a fatal weakness, but she is of the blood royal, that is all that matters, and with care and rigorous attention she may yet prove worthy of the crown."

Mall curtsied and rose to go, her eyes pitying as she contemplated the task before this old woman. She felt sure that Arbella would never rise to the heights this woman set for her.

"Well, girl?" Lady Shrewsbury demanded, watching her face intently. "What are you thinking?"

Mall hesitated. Then dared to speak. "Some things are always impossible," she said bravely. "Sometimes one has to cut the knot one cannot untie."

Lady Sherwsbury winced. "Aye," she said heavily. "My own secret thought. Well, we will see . . ."

When Mall rejoined Nan she was swamped by eager questions. "What happened? What did she say?"

The other ladies listened, watchful and secretly as curious. Mall shrugged. "She talked of court life, that is all."

Nan was disappointed. "Oh . . ."

Arbella, as Mall soon found, would be an enemy if she could not be a fellow conspirator. News of Mall's private interview with Lady Shrewsbury soon reached her, and she drew her own conclusions. From that moment, Mall was conscious of hatred in the weak, hysterical face whenever they met. Arbella was too frightened of Lady Shrewsbury to make a direct attack upon Mall, but she laid ambushes for her from cover, murmuring sly, spiteful remarks which were intended to be heard yet which were never addressed to Mall herself.

Nan, puzzled and unhappy, was not sure what was happening around her. Her loyalty to her sister would have put an end to her friendship with Arbella, had Mall not assured her that there was no need for her to take notice of Arbella's attitude. Mall wished Nan to remain Arbella's friend. She guessed Arbella would not dare ask Nan to help her now, fearing Nan would confess all to herself, and Arbella's friendship to Nan might be useful to Nan some day. As Lady Shrewsbury had said, Arbella was of the blood royal and who knew what wind would blow upon the weathercock of state?

Their day began at sunrise and ended when Lady Shrewsbury retired to bed. Between these times they moved to an unalterable

ritual. Meal times were never changed. Lessons followed each other with scarce a break. They learnt to walk with grace and dignity, to dance and use a fan, to talk to gentlemen, to eat and drink.

"To eat and drink?" Mall had laughed at first. "What do they think of us? That we are savages at Gawsworth?"

She soon discovered that court eating habits were far daintier and more elaborate than she had imagined. She had much to learn. Deft handling of her knife was essential. Greasy fingers must be wiped on a napkin, never licked. One must eat slowly, gracefully, pausing between each mouthful so that table conversation could be exhanged without any vulgar showing of food in the mouth, or even worse, spitting of food as one spoke. There were a hundred different things to learn about the various foods—how to eat game, how to peel fruit, how to cut meat, how to leave unwanted food on the edge of one's plate, not throw it to the dogs, as they did sometimes at Gawsworth in the hall.

She was taught to recognise the different wines, warned against immoderate use of them. It had never occurred to her that she might need to learn how to talk, yet hours were spent practising the art of conversation wtih both gentlemen and ladies of the household.

"Chit chat," she said contemptuously to Nan. "I wonder how much Sir Edward our father paid my lady to teach us to mouth these fol-de-rols?"

Nan blinked. "Ssh . . ." she warned, looking around.

Mall laughed at her expression. "Did it never occur to you that all this had to be paid for? And through the nose if I know my lady! Why she would sell the parings of her toes for what she thought they would fetch!"

Nan giggled, stifling the sound guiltily.

One lesson was conducted by Lady Shrewsbury personally. Each day they spent five minutes walking around her chamber while she poked them with her stick and grunted scornful comments on their posture.

"Girl, you will walk after Her Grace in public," she said to Mall tartly. "Let me see pride and hauteur in your carriage. You look about you too much, you are too easy with your smiles. Head up. Walk staring ahead. No glancing aside, no smiling."

Irritated, Mall lifted her chin and froze her face into a cold mask.

"Better," snapped Lady Shrewsbury.

Mall's thin brows arched contemptuously as she walked towards the old woman, and she was astonished to hear Lady Shrewsbury laugh under her breath.

"You'll do," the old woman mumbled. "Practise that before your mirror."

Mall did, later, and was taken aback to see herself. Pride and hauteur, she thought wryly. So that was how they looked to the onlooker. She eyed herself. She had changed in these few months. Her rich gowns, her gilt chains and jewels, gave her a glittering façade enhanced by the cold arch of her brows, her proud carriage and unsmiling mouth.

The country girl had emerged from her chrysalis as the court lady her father desired her to be.

The lessons went on, however, perfecting the polished jewel. She learnt the latest court dances, she learnt the new songs and was given lessons in court politics by a fashionable young man of Lady Shrewsbury's own family. An older gentleman lectured her on state affairs, teaching her to understand the see-saw balance of European politics, the new importance of control of the seas with all it meant to England in new trade with the Americas and the Indies. She learnt to judge which perfumes suited her best, which colours, which jewels. On some mornings she rode out with the long train of ladies and gentlemen from the house, carefully handling her mount in the careless, graceful fashion she had been taught, knowing herself under constant observation by her riding tutor, who had been scathing about her natural, easy carriage on a horse. "Are you a farmer's wife?" he had demanded, sneering. "Ride with your head and back in one straight, elegant line, pray. When you ride behind the Queen's Grace would you have her think you a sloven? You must look as though you were as graceful on a horse as you are when you are dancing."

"Oh, when will we go home?" Nan moaned one morning. "I am half sick of this place. It is too big, too grand. I long to sew sheets with my lady mother, or supervise the kitchen maids as they preserve fruit. A morning in the pantry at Gawsworth is all I long for."

Mall laughed sympathetically. Nan had always been a domesticated creature, more at home in the kitchen than anywhere else. She found the elegances of the Shrewsbury household wearisome.

"Our six months will be up soon," she assured her.

Spring of 1594 came suddenly with violets making the grass under the trees full of scented freshness and surprise. The cold chill walls seemed to breathe in that soft warmth, making the household less inclined to hurry about their duties, bringing smiles to stiff cheeks and a gentler pace to their lives. They rode out more, walked in little groups, talking, were less inclined to huddle around the fires.

Walking in the gardens in a chattering flock of girls, Mall saw a man in a dark brown leather jerkin and cloak walking towards them. For an instant she thought it was Richard, then her heart thudded in sick disappointment. Why should he be at Chatsworth? The sunlight on red hair, the thin body, had fooled her for an instant into seeing what she wished to see.

"Mall!"

Her hands caught at her waist, a wild brightness in her incredulous stare. She could not mistake that voice, and she ran to greet him, her hands instinctively stretched out in welcome, barely conscious of the whispers and stares of her forgotten companions.

He took her hands, smiling down at her, his eyes searching her face as closely as she searched his, tracing the familiar, unforgotten features which she thought must be imprinted on her inner eye. How often at night she had conjured up his image before she fell asleep. Now he stood before her, and she looked for small changes in his face hungrily, as though time stole from her when it altered him.

"How are you, Mall?" he asked, still holding her hands, their tiny whiteness quite swallowed up in his strong grip.

"Well," she said breathlessly. "And you, Richard?"

"Oh, I'm hale as ever," he said, a rueful smile on his lips. "Salt breezes blow away any dullness court life imposes, Mall."

She looked down at his clothes, smiling to herself. He looked out of place among the jaded peacocks of the household, vibrantly alive in his plain clothes, his body hard and powerful beneath the leather.

"But what are you doing at Chatsworth?" she asked, seeing his brown eyes slip over the staring girls some yards away. He had that trick of looking past one, as if scanning great distances, which came from years at sea.

He released her hands slowly, as though reluctant to let them go, and a sombre look came into his face. "I was riding

this way, and brought sad news from your family. I met your father in London, and he was just writing to you, so I came myself to save him the trouble." The brown eyes touched her lifted, anxious face gently. "I thought it would come easier if you heard it from a friend . . ."

She looked at him, her black eyes wide in readiness for grief. "What is it?"

"Your brother's child, little Holcroft, is dead," he said very gently.

Tears sprang into her eyes and she flinched, her head bending. "No, not the baby . . ."

Richard saw the curious look of the girls, and led her quickly into a box-lined walk in which they would be hidden from prying eyes.

She leaned against the hedge, weeping, her whole slender body shaken with tears of pain and anger. She remembered so vividly the boy's birth and Anna laughing on her pillows in her joy.

"Why," she muttered, sobbing. "Oh, Richard, why?"

He turned her into his arms, his hands stroking her back. Against her sleek black hair his mouth moved comfortingly. "It is hard, Mall, but they are young, and Anna is with child again, which your father thinks comforts her somewhat . . ."

It was pleasant to feel the hard, lean strength of his tall body against her. She turned her cheek shyly until it lay in the brown hollow of his throat, hearing the pulse there beat beneath her skin as he breathed, as if she were feeling his very life beating against her.

"It was kind of you to come yourself, Richard," she whispered.

"I was passing," he said roughly.

She smiled, the faint movement quivering over the skin of his throat as though she kissed him. "How close? A hundred miles?"

He pulled her away abruptly and held her, his strong hands gripping her slender shoulders. "I came as a kinsman to you and Nan," he said harshly. "Nothing more."

Her cheeks stung with the reproof and she looked away, hotly embarrassed. "I am sorry . . ."

Her words had implied that he had gone out of his way to come, and she vainly wished them unspoken. He had been shocked and angry when she kissed him in the summerhouse. He was so again. Could she never learn discretion?

He shook her suddenly, his hands hurting her, their tight grip biting into her fine bones. "Do not look so hurt, Mall," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Very well. I came because I had to see you. I am fooling nobody but myself if I lie to you. Your father talked of nothing but what a fine lady you were becoming and how well my lady Shrewsbury writes of you. I wanted to see how much of my Mall was left beneath the façade they are erecting around you. The sad, sweet child you were was very dear to me." His brown eyes slid over her rich gown and glittering chains. "They do their work well. Is Mall within, or have they worked there too?"

The savagery in his voice hurt. She looked at him in silent reproach.

"You glitter like the sunrise where you were once as soft as moonlight at sea," he said.

Chagrin made her lift her black head and sweep him a graceful curtsy. "I am sorry I do not meet with your approval, cousin. My lady Shrewsbury has been at much pains to teach me how to charm."

"She taught you nothing you did not know already," he said between his teeth.

She looked at him through her long lashes, something in his voice making her heart beat heavily. "Do you think I will be a success at court?"

"The men will go mad over you," he said flatly.

Her lashes fluttered down over the smooth cheeks. "Do you think so, Richard?"

He took a sharp breath, then lifted her small chin with a hard finger and looked directly into her great, dark smiling eyes.

"Do not practise your craft on me, Mall."

She gave him a flickering, excited smile. "Are you immune, cousin?"

He swore, then, under his breath, and his tough cheeks were filled with angry colour. "What have they done to you, Mall?" he asked bitterly. "Turned a sweet child into a courtesan?"

She flinched, shrinking. "Oh . . ." Her own face turned crimson. She wished she were dead rather than have him speak to her in that cutting tone.

Turning, she moved to leave him, but his hand caught her, pushing her face into his strong shoulder, his finger caressing her white nape tenderly. "I am sorry, Mall. Do not look so shamed. I was not angry with you, but with fate."

Bewilderment brought her face up to stare at him. "What fate, Richard?"

He curved a hand possessively around her throat under her black hair, and the brown eyes were hungry on her face. "When you come to court, child, you'll turn men's heads with that smile of yours, and I must watch and keep my distance. When you looked at me like that I thought of how it must be one day, and I was angry, but not with you, Mall, never with you."

She moved towards him involuntarily, her eyes on his mouth, reading the hard, firm lines in all their sexual promise, her heart beating fast beneath the stiff silk of her gown. "No, Mall," he muttered harshly, but when her soft mouth touched the strong outline of his, she felt it taken hungrily, his long hands sliding round her to pull her nearer. The spring sunshine was warm on her cheek as she stood, feeling as though their lives flowed into each other in that long kiss. Richard groaned against her mouth and moved away, his face flushed.

"I have delivered my message. I must go. Write to your father. He has great need of your sweet comfort, Mall. He takes Holcroft's death hard."

"I will," she promised easily. "Poor Father. I can guess how he must feel. Anna, too. Her first-born . . . it is a loss not to be borne." She looked at him pleadingly. "But do not go yet, Richard. Come and see Nan. You must eat and drink at the house before you go on your way."

He shook his head. "I have far to go before I sleep tonight. I have brought my news, sad as it is, and I have seen you, Mall. I must go."

They looked at each other in silence, then he took her hand and bent his long back in a graceful courtier's bow, kissing her fingers respectfully.

"You will be a great lady when next we meet, sweet Mall."

She was shivering. "Do not speak like that . . . you make it sound like a farewell for ever."

"It is," he said roughly. "For ever, Mall, for your sweet sake. Do not forget me altogether, though. We will meet as fond cousins should at court and smile."

He gave her a last look and strode away, his cloak fluttering in the spring wind. Mall felt chilled to the bone. She sat down on a garden seat and leaned her face into her hands. For a

long time she sat there, remembering everything he had said and how he had looked. Then she went to find Nan and give her Anna's sad news. They wept together in private, finding some comfort in each other's presence so far from home.

Before they left for home Mall had an interview with Lady Shrewsbury for an hour, which astonished her, for she knew the old lady hated waste of time on anything but profit.

"I am pleased with your progress," she was told. "We have taught you all we could of the externals. The rest is up to you, girl. Anyone can look like a great lady. It is what lies within that counts, however. Remember that. You will be expected to marry, of course. Who you marry is your business, but your choice will dictate your future. Marry as you wish to live. My opinion of you is that you are clever and ambitious. You deserve better than some country gentleman with nothing in his head but his horses and dogs. Any fool will do for him. A clever woman can rise very high. Use that head of yours. Choose as high as you can reach. With your looks you may well succeed."

Mall curtsied. "I am aware of my father's hopes for me, my lady."

Lady Shrewsbury's shrewd eyes peered at her. "You wish to please your father?"

"Yes, Madam."

"That is well enough, but please yourself, too, for you are the one who has to live with your choice. Take no account of love. It is short-lived and misleads."

Mall's lids flickered and again the shrewd old eyes dived into her soul.

"Romantic notions? Forget them. Choose rather a man you respect and can manage. Pretty boys grow into fools."

Mall laughed, and after a moment Lady Shrewsbury laughed, too, grimly.

"I will remember all you have told me, my lady," Mall assured her.

There was a faint movement of emotion in the wrinkled old face. "I wish my Arbella had some of your brains," Lady Shrewsbury said heavily. "I could work marvels with a girl like you. You have a sort of beauty, not the fashionable kind, but I have noticed the men look twice at you. You strike the eye. That black hair and eyes . . . original, perhaps even startling, but Anne Boleyn had that colouring. I remember her well. A bold, wild clever creature. You remind me of her. I

think the same thought may strike Her Grace, and if it does she may take to you. If she likes you, your fortune is made. Where she once loves she is unshakable. Loyal and true, whatever men may say of her. Her friends may betray her, but she never betrays them." Again that twitch of emotion. "I wish my Arbella had that quality, but the Stuarts were ever faithless. It is strange that they inspire such loyalty, but human hearts are strange things."

Mall saw her sink into a deep silence, her face absorbed. She wondered if she should tiptoe away. Old people sometimes fell asleep with their eyes open.

But after a while the tired eyes focused on her again. "Yes, I think you will find yourself well liked at court. You have wit. Use it. Her Grace loves a witty companion. Her mother was one of the wittiest women I ever met. You are fortunate in that black and white are her favourite colours at the moment. They suit you well. You are graceful, and that, too will appeal to her. You are musical, which again will please her. Indeed, child, you have all the gifts I could desire for you. All but one."

"What is that, my lady?"

Lady Shrewsbury sighed. "I suspect you are high-strung and emotional, and that is unfortunate. To succeed in your task you will need a cold head as well as a clever one. Emotions ruin plans. Try to control your heart, child, or it will betray you into folly."

Mall bent her head obediently. She remembered what Richard Leveson had told her in the garden at Gawsworth: guard that generous heart of yours . . .

Lady Shrewsbury extended her claw-like hand. Mall knelt to kiss her ringed fingers reverently. She had grown to be fond of the old woman and she knew she would miss her when she left Chatsworth.

"One day you must come to visit me at Hardwick Hall when it is finished. I began to build it after my late husband died, for his family require me to leave this house. When it is ready I shall move there to die. It will be the greatest house I have ever built. I built Chatsworth, you know, but I learnt much from the building of it, and Hardwick will be a greater triumph. Keep in touch with me, child. Do not forget me. I'll not forget you and I will watch your progress with interest."

Dismissed, Mall went out to join Nan in the maids chamber, where their chests were being packed ready for the

next morning when Sir Edward would arrive to fetch them.

Arbella and Nan exchanged gifts at the last, but Mall was excluded from this act of friendship, for which she was thankful. She wanted nothing from Arbella Stuart. Each time she saw her she felt again that intuitive quiver of premonition. If only the girl had had more of Lady Shrewsbury in her, she thought! What a Queen she would have made! The old woman's words returned to haunt her. Emotions ruin plans . . . a cold head as well as a clever one . . . Yes, she thought, staring at Arbella's flushed, emotional face. Looking at the other girl she saw the stark truth in these warnings, and she pitied Lady Shrewsbury whose clever, cold-headed plans might yet be wrecked on the rocks by Arbella's uncontrolled nature. The worst of it was Lady Shrewsbury saw the danger but could do nothing to avoid it.

Sir Edward was elated when he saw them. "Money well spent," he muttered, prowling around Mall in admiration. "By God, but the old hag has worked marvels with you, sweetheart. I barely knew you. You have grown into a beauty."

Nan was unenviously delighted with his pleasure. "Mall looks like a great lady, doesn't she, Father?"

He turned and gave her a loving smile. "But you are still my dearest Nan. Chatsworth has left little mark on you and for that I am very glad. I would not have you other than you are, and nor, I swear, would your John."

Nan flushed at her husband's name. "Father?" The imploring question was wordless.

He patted her cheek. "You will join John when Mall goes to court, love. I promise."

"When will that be, Father?" Mall asked, seeing Nan's anxious eyes.

He shrugged. "When the Queen's Grace sends for you, Mall. Weeks or months—who knows? We must wait in patience."

CHAPTER SIX

THE DAYS LENGTHENED into weeks, the weeks into months and still she was awaiting the Queen's summons. All that spring and summer the rain streamed down the leaded panes and roads were impassable. The labourers toiled in the fields, heads covered with old sacks, eyes occasionally raised in despair to the leaden skies from which the rain fell without mercy.

Dick wrote from London with news of the court. The Queen was too preoccupied with treason to have time to spare for anything else. A rash of conspiracies had broken out. The Earl of Essex had uncovered a plot by Doctor Lopez, a Jew of Spanish extraction, who had attended the Queen for years. Lord Essex divided the world into two camps—those for him, and those against him—and against the latter he was remorseless in his tenacity. He had put men to work to pull down Doctor Lopez, who had been foolish enough to dislike him, and he had found what he had hoped to find, a plot to kill the Queen.

A friend of Dick Leveson, a young seaman called William Polwhele, had unmasked a second plot to kill the Queen soon afterwards, and his news had so terrified her that the Queen had stiffened the measures taken to protect her. Life at court was becoming unbearable.

"The Queen has had two lucky escapes," said Sir Edward.

"If the man Polwhele is to be trusted," his wife said sourly. She disliked Cornishmen. Walter Raleigh had mocked her on her last visit to court and she took all his friends from the West Country to be of his kidney, insolent and arrogant.

"Dick Leveson would have no friend who was dishonest," said Sir Edward in that tone which silenced all argument.

Mall's return from Lady Shrewsbury's house had laid down a new pattern in the relationship with her mother. Having learnt her lessons well, she carried herself now with a quiet

hauteur which her mother found intimidating. Her icy manner kept her mother at bay, yet it made the house uninhabitable for both women. Mall felt as though she were encased in ice, shut out from ordinary human contact, watching the household from an intolerable distance. Often she knew her mother longed to strike the calm cold face she presented to her, but Mall only had to stare at her with unflickering dark eyes for Lady Fytton to turn away. Her suppressed rage gave her constant indigestion and headaches for which she dosed herself with simples of balm and ginger, or an inhalation of basil. They were both living on their nerves and it made life unbearable for both. In many ways victory was more bitter than the old bondage.

In June Ned wrote begging her to come to stay during the last weeks of Anna's pregnancy. Lady Fytton was pathetically eager for her to go, and Mall no less eager to ride away from Gawsworth. She found the price of triumph too high.

Despite her swollen stomach, Anna looked feverish with anxiety and grief, her small face had lost flesh and her bones looked sharp beneath the skin. Her blue eyes were swollen with weeping, their lids pink.

Mall had been met in the hall by a grimy, lacklustre servant who had shown her up to Anna's chamber reluctantly, Ned being out in the fields.

"Oh, Mall," Anna cried, as she entered the chamber. "I was afraid they would not let you come. I am so glad to see you."

Mall stripped off her dusty riding gloves and looked around the chamber. The summer sunlight lay in yellow pools on the floor, turning the rushes to gold. A new tapestry hung on the wall opposite the window, covering the stone cold walls. Anna had clearly worked hard to make the house more welcoming. Little touches everywhere betrayed her hand. A small marble-topped table stood near the fire-place bearing a great glazed jug of summer flowers culled from the manor garden: roses, cornflowers, daisies with huge yellow hearts. The bed was new; carved with mermaids and leaping fish, ornate columns and small recesses in which candles were placed in readiness for the coming of the dark.

"You have been busy! I see many changes. What does Ned think of it all?"

"He says I am too extravagant."

"He talks of extravagance! The pot calling the kettle black! That does not sound like my brother."

"Ned has altered. He has so many worries. He finds the manor work tiring, but he is so determined not to give his father room to find fault with him that he works from sunrise to sunset."

"Oh, that Fytton pride! I would suffer death rather than beg mercy!"

"We have to make the manor pay," Anna said heavily. "We have left ourselves no choice. How could we go cap in hand to Sir Edward and admit failure? Ned would rather throw himself in the fishpond." Her blue eyes smiled faintly. "Oh, Mall, how I sicken of fish. We eat them every day. Either fish or pigeon. Ned will not even let me have the culled beasts for our table. They all go to market."

"He's a true Fytton then. My father is cut from the same cloth. When I was a child I loathed pigeon pie but I ate it several times a week. What of the coneys? Does Ned not trap them for your tables? I am very partial to stewed rabbit."

"We eat coney often, too. Oh, but I yearn for roasted beef or pork, Mall." Anna sighed. "You know how bad the harvests have been. This year may prove no better."

"Dick writes that in London a bushel of rye is selling at five shillings," Mall nodded.

"It rained every day here from the first Sunday after Whitsuntide until the day before yesterday," Anna said. "I began to think it would never stop. Ned is half out of his mind with worry."

"Poor Anna," Mall said gently. The reality of life with Ned was obviously proving far from the dream they had pursued with such relentless passion.

Anna was eager to talk, her tongue thirsty after long weeks of isolation, and Mall settled to listen, seeing that she had been summoned to be an ear for all Anna's unhappiness. While the other girl talked, Mall watched her, reading the genuine loneliness Anna felt in the lines which were beginning to show themselves upon her face, marring the smooth contours of her features. No doubt Anna would recover her looks, but two pregnancies had left their mark upon her, and grief for her dead child had eaten into her gay spirit.

"Ned avoids me if he can. He visits me as little as he dare. Oh, he always has excuses. He has too much to do, it is true, but he could make time if he wished. I know he could. He doesn't want to see me. I remind him of things he wants to forget." She passed a thin hand over her face as if wiping out

time. "Ned has always hated anything that makes him sad. He likes to be gay and carefree. I have brought him nothing but sadness."

"He loves you, Anna. Why else should he write begging me to come and comfort you?"

"So that he need not feel guilty because he cannot comfort me himself," said Anna flatly. "He knows he should share this time with me but being Ned he cannot force himself to take up the grief. He wants to bury it, to put it behind him."

"Perhaps he is wise. Anna, you can't live with your grief for ever. It has to be put away." As she had cut away the pain of knowing her mother did not love her, she thought wryly. She had learnt the necessity of cauterising a wound and letting it heal. "Burn out your pain and forget it, Anna. You will soon have another child to help you forget."

"It is easy for you to talk. You have not buried a child. I wake at night and cry out for him. He was so small and soft. To think of him buried out there in the cold earth makes me shake with terror and pain." Her eyes were fixed, glazed, obsessed. "He must be so frightened, all alone in the dark. I did not even see him buried. They took him away from me and laid him in the dark, cold ground." The blue eyes had a nightmare stare. "So little and lost and all alone in the dark. I wake up thinking I hear him crying for me. Sometimes I'm so sure I hear him that I take a candle and search for him. Ned gets so angry with me on those nights . . ."

Mall knelt beside her, holding her hands tightly, horrified by the glimpse of hell she was getting.

"Anna, where is your faith? How can you think he is frightened when God has him in His loving care?"

"Mall, I can't believe . . ." Anna's voice was dry with fever, her fingers, locked in Mall's, were icy-cold. "If I believe, what punishment would a just God ask of me for what I once did? You know what I did. I worshipped at the Black Sabbath once. If God exists he will demand retribution for that sin, the worst sin any soul could commit against him." She stared at Mall, her skin stretched like parchment around her nightmare-ridden eyes. "My baby is dead because I sinned. Would one death be enough to wipe out such a sin? Won't God demand damnation for all my babies?"

"Anna!" Mall's voice was hushed with fear and she looked over her shoulder at the closed door. "Do not say such things. Do not even think them."

"How can I help it? I cannot tell Ned my fears. I have to tell someone. Ned would hate me if he ever found out. He would blame me for the baby's death."

True enough, Mall thought. Careless, easygoing Ned had little imagination. He would never forgive Anna for concealing her past from him. He would neither understand nor forgive why she had allowed curiosity and boredom to lead her into evil.

She looked at Anna's face. Somehow she had to find the words to help her, but her tongue seemed locked. She briefly closed her eyes, praying as she had never prayed before.

"God would not punish such little ones for a sin committed before they were born," she said.

"Then why did Holcroft die?"

"Babies often die. It cannot be helped. As to your sin, Anna, it is you who suffers, and perhaps that is your punishment. How can you believe that God would be so cruel as to take his revenge on a tiny child?"

"The sins of the father shall be visited on the children," Anna cried wildly.

"On earth, perhaps, but not after death. Holcroft is in Heaven, Anna. He was baptised. He was sinless."

"He lies in the dark, cold earth," Anna cried wildly, again.

"His mortal remains, not his immortal soul," Mall insisted.

Anna gave a long weary sigh. Tears began falling in a soft rain down her wet cheeks. Mall held her, rocking her, feeling the shaking of her limbs as though Anna had an ague. After a while she helped her to undress and got her to bed. A stone water bottle at her feet, Anna fell into troubled sleep. Mall sat beside the fire, patiently watching her, while the room grew darker and the firelight flickered on the walls in mimic shadow battle. The door creaked open. A candle advanced into the room, making a new yellow glow. Ned's face showed in it warily.

"She's asleep," Mall whispered.

"Come down to sup with me."

"I'll stay in here tonight. She should not be left alone."

He hunched a weary shoulder. "As you please. Do you want me to send up some supper?"

"Yes," Mall said, irritated with him. Ned would never bear troubles lightly. He had had life too easy too young. He wanted still to be carefree and gay.

He lingered, chewing his lower lip. "She's very sick. D'you think she may die, Mall?"

The question made her angry, but she kept her temper. Did Ned secretly hope Anna would die? Their marriage had laden him with troubles. Anna herself had recognised that Ned saw her as the root of all his griefs. It would not even surprise Mall to hear Ned was weary of Anna. He had always been a will-o'-the-wisp in love, darting here and there, always in search of fresh pastures. Anna had caught him by denying him so long. Once his hunger had been sated he had lost his wild passion for her. Now he saw her only as a sad, sick woman who no longer brought him pleasure.

"I will not let her die," Mall said calmly.

He glanced at the great bed, buried in shadows, outside the circle of firelight and candlelight. Anna's body was invisible beneath the coverlet. The heavy curtains shrouded her. She might not have been there. Only the faint rhythm of her breathing betrayed her presence.

"It's very hard," he burst out.

"Ssh . . ." She glanced anxiously at the bed.

He lowered his voice. "We've had curst ill luck. It's no life for a man. Tied to the manor day in day out with a wife who does nothing but weep. She's even taken to walking in her sleep, moaning like a ghost. It isn't natural. I know she has been hit hard but so have I, and she makes no effort to ease my grief. None at all. She gives in to her own grief and abandons me."

She looked at him wonderingly. His handsome face was soft with self-pity. Poor Anna. My brother is a broken reed. She sacrified so much to achieve him. She dared and risked everything. And what has she got? A selfish, whining boy who has neither courage nor kindness to offer her when she needs it? But there was no point in reproaching him. His nature was set hard. She would have given much to say what was in her mind, but instead she set herself to putting him in a better temper. He had to be soothed, lifted out of his self-pity. If only their mother were here. She always knew just how to cheer her favourite son.

Trying to mimic her mother, she said brightly, "Your supper will spoil, Ned dear. You must be so tired, too. Go down and eat. You must not let your worries drag you down. You have to be brave and cheerful. After all, you are master here." She kissed him, standing a-tiptoe. "Why, I swear

you're twice as broad in the shoulder since I last saw you."

Ned grinned, flattered. "I work alongside the labourers in the fields."

"And it shows. Your face is quite sunburned."

"We've been haymaking. Thirsty work."

"Then you must try the hogshead of claret our father sent with me as a christening gift."

"Claret? That was very good of him. It is sixty-five shillings in Chester. I've been drinking nothing but our own home-brewed for months. I can't afford better, prices being what they are. I don't know what the country is coming to . . . wheat is selling at seven shillings the bushel, and the harvest threatens to be so poor I doubt I'll clear my costs this year, even if the price rises even higher."

"Perhaps next year will be better."

"We're due for a good summer." He gave her his old, careless smile. "I'll send up supper for you, Mall. Do not sit there all night, will you? Creep into bed beside Anna, or pull out the truckle bed—the spare linen is in the chest, there."

"I'll do very well. Don't fret yourself about me," she said quietly.

When he had gone she returned to her chair. The ash slowly sifted through the iron gate. The logs cracked and sent a shower of bright orange sparks over her skirt. She drew back a little, her face flushed from the heat.

A maid came in quietly with her supper on a tray. Mall pointed to the marble-topped table. The girl set down the tray, then placed another log on the sinking fire. The blaze shot up the chimney as the girl withdrew.

Mall contemplated her supper with a grim eye. A manchet of rye bread, sliced brawn with mustard and a very small salad. Untempting fare after a long, hard ride. Had this been the sort of food Anna had been getting? No wonder she looked so weak. The servants were obviously taking advantage of her enforced seclusion up here.

The brawn was over-spiced, no doubt to hide the condition of the meat. The salad was, at least, edible—freshly gathered in the garden, lettuce, cress, succory, flowers of borage, still dewy and crisp, refreshing to the mouth. The beer, however, was thin stuff, poorly brewed. She was angry with Ned for sending up beer when she had brought him a hogshead of claret on the wagon which carried her clothes from Gawsworth.

Still hungry, she got undressed and got to bed. Anna's

body curved warmly against her back as she settled to sleep. Once or twice during the night Mall woke to hear her sister-in-law crying softly. Each time she turned and comforted Anna back to sleep.

She woke at the promptings of her empty stomach. Anna was sleeping deeply, her hand curled underneath her head. Mall slid silently out of bed and dressed hurriedly. The fire had been left to go out. No servant had looked in during the night to see to it, she suspected. The chamber was chilly.

She went downstairs and found a few servants making desultory attempts to prepare breakfast. They looked at her sullenly.

Mall took a deep breath, her hands linked at her waist. Her voice was unsteady with rage, which at first they took to be nervousness.

"Master makes no complaints," a blowsy girl retorted to Mall's first remarks.

"Do you dare to answer me back, girl? Do you want to be whipped? Where is my brother?"

"Master is abed," another said insolently.

They glanced at each other and laughed. Mall knew at once that Ned was at his old tricks, amusing himself with serving wenches while Anna lay ill upstairs. Her face stiffened into the mask of authority.

"Fetch him to me," she said icily, looking at the only man present.

He was a small, thin man with a wrinkled face like an ancient apple, russet-brown with wind and weather, his blue eyes narrow as a fox's under thin brows.

"I dursen't, Mistress," he said quietly, without showing any sign of the insolence the others indulged in.

Angrily Mall said, "Then fetch me to him."

"You mightn't like what you see," muttered one of the others with a titter.

"She might, at that," another retorted.

They both nudged each other, giggling.

"We're all born the same way," the first said, her eyes taunting Mall. "Forked creatures all. Like to see how t'is done, Mistress?"

Mall looked at the man. "Take me to my brother." She knew she had to act now. Without Ned's authority the servants would not heed her. "I expect my father, Sir Edward, within the week. Is he to find the manor in this state?"

The women quietened, their faces alarmed. They looked at each other nervously. Sir Edward was their true master. Ned was only the tenant acting for his father. They all knew Sir Edward's temper. He was no green boy to cheat and defy. He would not hesitate to turn them out of the manorhouse.

"I'll fetch him, Mistress," the man said.

Mall watched him run out of the hall, then turned to the women. "My sister will eat pottage of beef bones, turnips, parsnips and cabbage, with a manchet of white bread, and some good ale. Before you take up her breakfast let me taste it. You'd poison her if you sent up the sort of food you brought to me last night."

Sulkily they returned to their work. A moment later Ned, half dressed and rather flushed, appeared. He looked at Mall warily.

"What is it?"

"Brother, our father may be coming later this week, and I do not think he would like what he saw in this house. May I take charge while you are so busy? This is not man's work."

Ned was tucking his shirt into his Venetians and pushing his arms into the sleeves of his doublet. "I would be grateful, Mall," he said, relieved not to hear recriminations. He gave her a quick, wary look. "Was that all you wanted to ask me?"

She gave him an open-eyed smile. "Why, yes, Ned. I did not like to take charge without your express permission."

He shrugged, resuming his usual swagger. "Do as you think fit. These knaves need a firm hand."

"Will you eat breakfast?" she invited.

He looked shifty. "I've broken my fast," he said quickly. "I'll be off to the fields."

She did not try to detain him. As soon try to hold water in a sieve. When he had gone she turned back to the women, shamelessly eavesdropping while they pretended to work.

"Skim that pottage," she commanded coldly. "My sister's stomach is too delicate to take all that grease. Dice the vegetables smaller than that. She does not want them whole! And you may put that rye bread in the pig swill. It is not fit for humans. Make fresh."

"We do not bake today," one of them said under her breath.

"You will bake when you are told to do so," Mall said in a tone that silenced them.

She looked at the russet-cheeked man who had returned with Ned. "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he told politely.

"Then, Jacob, I will put you in charge of these women. What happened to the steward who governed the house when I was here last?"

"He died of the plague and your brother decided to look to things himself," Jacob told her.

"My father will name you steward if you do the work well," Mall told him. "I have a letter to write. It must go to Gawsworth at once. Have a man ready to ride within the hour."

Jacob nodded, bowing. "Yes, Mistress."

She returned to Anna's chamber and found her lying drowsily in the great bed, her face flushed with sleep. Anna looked up at her with wide, dark-lashed eyes.

"Is Ned here?" she asked anxiously.

"He has eaten and gone out to the fields," Mall reassured her. "Sit up, sister. Let me ease your pillows." She plumped up the pillows, then washed Anna's face gently with cool water and wiped it with a smooth cloth. Picking up a brush she slowly brushed Anna's hair into a semblance of neatness. "Now, are you hungry?"

Anna smiled faintly. "Do you wish me to be, Mall?"

A tap on the door made Mall turn her head. "Come in . . ."

Jacob entered, bearing a tray. A bowl of steaming pottage made its arrival felt with savoury odours. Mall looked at it closely, tasted it and nodded. It had been carefully skimmed. The surface was free of floating scum and grease spots.

She gestured to Jacob to place it down, then made Anna sit up straight. Gently, firmly, she fed her mouthful after mouthful, as if she were a child. Anna protested once or twice, but subsided under Mall's kind smile.

"You must get back your strength. What would my father say if he knew how ill you looked?"

"Your father hates me!"

"He did once, but that was long ago. Now he is fond of you, Anna." She put the spoon down. "That is sufficient for now. You must sleep again. Sleep will be all the medicine you need. I will come back with your dinner at midday."

"If Ned comes in to dinner," Anna begged, but bit the words off quickly, her eyes desolate.

"I'll bring him to see you," Mall nodded.

Anna gave her a long glance, her lips parted on a word she never spoke.

Mall went down to find Jacob busy. The hall was being swept and clean rushes brought in—the stale smell was banished with the old. Mall supervised the work in the kitchen, wishing Nan were here to do it, for she was no match for these lazy, slovenly girls. They needed a Fytton tongue to goad them.

She left them working and went to write her letter. She gave her father some idea of how she had found things at Aldford, and asked him to send a bolt of blue silk for Anna. It would take Anna's mind off her grief if she had the pleasure of making a new gown. Adding a line for her mother, she begged Lady Fytton to send some jellies, comfits and other luxuries to lighten Anna's diet. "My brother's table is sparse," she wrote. "Anna needs some delicacies to tempt her appetite."

The servant rode off with the letter at once, and Mall turned herself to driving the serving women to work. They still resented her but they now held their tongues for fear of what might follow.

At noon Ned came in from the fields in dusty disarray. After washing, he suggested that he might visit Anna, but Mall persuaded him to eat first, having decided that Ned would feel the better for a good meal. She wanted him to be in good temper when he saw his wife.

Ned grinned when he sat down at the trestle table laden with good food. "What's this, Mall? I shall be plucked to my last feather if you set a table like this every day."

She looked around the dishes: a first course of beef, fritters, conies and manchets of good wheaten bread. A second course of boiled lamb, woodcock, lark pie and pigeons boiled with asparagus. There was a dish of curd cheese and some buttermilk, fruit and a sweet tart.

"This will last us a good while," she pointed out. "We can sup on what is left and eat the rest at dinner tomorrow."

"If these thieving knaves leave us any," Ned said grimly.

Mall glanced down the table at the servants. "They'll leave what they cannot eat," she said in tones which made her meaning clear.

Ned set to and ate hungrily. When he had finished he belched politely and stood up. "I'll be off to work again," he said.

"You must see Anna first," Mall reminded.

He frowned. "I have so much to do, Mall."

"She has been eager to see you," Mall said.

Anna had eaten her meal earlier in her chamber. Mall had seen to it that she was fed well, but Anna needed more than a good meal if she was to recover her old health. She needed love and comfort.

Ned sulkily followed her up the stairs. Mall led him across the chamber, instinct urging her not to leave husband and wife alone just yet.

Anna was sitting up against her pillows, her hair loose about her slender shoulders. Warmth and good food had given her back some colour. Her blue eyes shone as she held out her hand to Ned.

"Why," he cried, delighted. "You are better!"

"Mall is to be thanked for that," Anna said, her fingers twining around his hand, drawing him closer.

Ned kissed her raised mouth lightly. "I am so happy to see you looking well," he said awkwardly.

"Sit down and tell me your news," Anna said, patting the bed.

"Ned has some important business to see to this afternoon," Mall said quickly. "I had to let him come and see you, for he pleaded so hard, but he must not stay. You are not to be tired, Anna. You are to rest and get strong again."

"Aye," Ned said heartily. "That is it. Rest and get strong, my love. I'll see thee tonight." He kissed her again, quickly, gave her a harassed smile and hurriedly left the chamber. Anna lay back against her pillow with her smile quite gone.

"He could hardly bear to touch me," she whispered.

"Ned was always uneasy with an illness," Mall said calmly. "You must be out of bed when he comes tonight. Sitting in your chair by the fire as though you were much recovered."

"He no longer loves me," Anna cried with despair in her voice.

"Of course he does," Mall soothed. "You will see. Once you are up from your bed Ned will come round." She would stay to see him persuaded to be loving to his wife, she thought fiercely. It was time Ned learnt to be less selfish.

Two days later a reply came from Gawsworth in the shape of Nan, riding beside a wagon loaded with gifts for Anna. Lady Fytton had sent all and more that Mall had requested. Apple jelly, quinces, shrimps potted in butter, cowslip wine and rich sausages, venison pasties and brawn, a cage of live

ducks for plucking, half a pig, a haunch of beef, a quartered lamb—the kitchens at Gawsworth must have worked hard to pack up all the delicacies Lady Fytton had commanded them to put up. Best of all, though, was Nan's presence. She no sooner set eyes on the house and servants than her scourging tongue began to make the necessary changes. Mall gladly left the house to her sister while she spent all her energy into coaxing Anna back to sufficient health and spirits to make the birth of a live, healthy child a possibility.

On a rainy July evening Anna went into labour. The midwife appeared in the chamber, clucking and coaxing. "Now then, m'dear, no need to get into a fluster. Lie you still and the babby will come the faster. You mustn't fight nature." She turned to Mall briskly. "Tell 'em to open all the doors and windows now. Hurry. Ill luck to have a shut door in the house at this time. Send a girl to make up that fire. We can't have the little mother catching a chill."

Mall returned to the room later and found Anna lying quietly, covered by heaped bedlinen, while the midwife moved about, her dark shadow dancing on the wall in the firelight like the shadow of a witch at a Sabbath. The image made Mall shiver and cross herself with an instinct bred for generations. Then she shuddered at herself for lapsing into such pagan papistry, a thing she had never done before. It was a common sight among the country people even today, just as it was common for them to cross their fingers behind their backs as a protection against witches. She must have picked it up from one of the servants without even knowing it.

The child was born at midnight, a small dark girl with fluffy wisps of black hair along her back.

"We'll call her Anne," said Ned, half drunk and cheerfully owlish as he peered into the cradle. "After you, Nan, my sweetest sister."

Anna looked quickly at Mall, her lips parting on a protest. Mall shook her head, smiling. She did not resent the fact that Ned preferred Nan's easy good humour to her own unspoken criticism. Ned recognised in Nan his mother's image.

The summer dwindled into autumn and at last Anna was well again, restored to her place as mistress of the house, a house once more shining like a new pin, and servants once more aware of their place.

"We must leave," Mall told her.

"Oh, Mall, stay a while longer. What shall I do without you?"

"You'll govern your household, nurse your little girl and make Ned happy," Mall said softly.

Anna looked into the fire, her lips trembling. "Ned no longer loves me."

"He needs you," Mall said. "He will always need a woman to mother him. My brother's weak, Anna, but can be coaxed. You will have to be more mother than wife to him all his life. You will have two children to care for—little Nan and my poor Ned."

Anna heaved a sigh. "I did not think it would be like this."

"Be kind to him. Don't be angry with his weakness. Mother made him what he is, and it is too late to change him."

She parted from Anna with reluctance. They had grown close in the last few weeks. Although Mall loved Nan better, she knew that her feelings for Anna were stronger because they were mixed with pity—Anna's life would not be easy. Ned would stray and wound her time and time again, and she would have to hide her hurt because he hated to be reproached. She must pretend to be happy when she was heavy with sadness. She must be strong when he was weak while allowing him to believe himself the stronger. Mall did not envy her.

On their return to Gawsworth she was excited to hear that they were, at last, going to London.

"The Queen has not summoned you," her father explained. "But I hope that if we are near the court she may remember her promise. There is a place vacant now. Lady Bridget Manners has suddenly married, without the Queen's permission, and the Queen is furious with her family. If you are to get Lady Bridget's place you must be on hand."

The journey to London was appalling. It rained permanently. As they neared London the weather grew worse. They only just reached the city in time. Bridges broke across tidal rivers. Floods swept away whole villages. Many people and animals were drowned and the harvests were totally ruined. On their heels limped a raggle-taggle tail of drenched, despairing peasants whose livelihood had gone and who sought help in London.

Eyeing them wrathfully, Sir Edward burst out, "How are they all to be fed? Are there not already too many slums

crowding the alleys in Southwark and Kentish Town? Penny-rents spring up daily."

"Penny-rents?" she asked him curiously.

"Tenements which are let out at a penny a week for each tenant—they crowd into the rooms like mice in a cheese. They breed infection and rebellion. The rabble who live in them are full of hatred and envy. They should be burned down."

Lady Fytton said, "I thought the Council had ordered them to be pulled down."

"They make orders which are never fulfilled," said Sir Edward contemptuously. "Those responsible for seeing them carried out are bribed by the landlords. It is shameful."

They put up at a good tavern in a street near Whitehall. On their first evening in London Sir Edward and Lady Fytton went to visit Sir William Knollys, to plead with him to ask the Queen for a place for Mall. Nan and Mall sat by the fire in their chamber, warming their stockinged legs with skirts pushed over their knees, eating roast chestnuts from an iron shovel.

Dick burst into the room suddenly, all glowing health after a walk through rainy streets, with two gentlemen with him.

Flushing, Nan and Mall dropped their skirts to hide their legs and jumped up to curtsy, confused and embarrassed.

Dick roared with laughter, his love curls tossing. "You look like two chambermaids caught out! No need to blush, sweetheart!" He threw a careless arm around Mall's slender shoulders. "You have very pretty legs, doesn't she, Harry?"

"Very pretty," said one of the gentlemen, his long curls brushed by a languid white hand. Blue eyes coolly surveyed Mall who lifted her small chin in defiance of his insolence.

She knew who he was at once—that long, thin aristocratic face, the full, pouting lower lip, the mincing gait and delicate hands, around the wrist of one a string of coral beads jingled as he moved.

"My lord Southampton, Mall," Dick said, staggering slightly. His flush was as much caused by over-indulgence in wine as by the weather, she saw now. His inhibitions gone, he lent an arm to the Earl's white neck, his fingers idly stroking the boy's flesh. The Earl watched Mall, his lids drooping. As Dick's index finger brushed against that full lower lip the Earl let the tip of his tongue appear and, like a sensual cat, licked Dick's hand briefly.

Mall felt her skin crimson. It was one thing to know her brother to be a catamite. Another to see him treated as one.

Southampton's insolent eyes narrowed in amusement. "I've shocked your little sister, Dick," he said.

Nan, stiff as a starched ruff, said coldly, "I fear we must beg you will excuse us, my lord. We are not dressed for company."

The third member of the trio was leaning against the mantelshelf watching them intently. Mall glanced at him, her dark eyes glinting between their white lids. He was older than the other two—a man of middle years, she guessed. Slightly built, dressed in a quiet and gentlemanly fashion, his red-brown hair was thinning and brushed forward to hide bald patches. A high, domed forehead, arched brows over direct, thoughful blue eyes which were luminous at this moment with a gentle sympathy, he seemed capable of reading exactly how she felt. The delicacy of his eyes were belied by a full sensuality in his mouth and a puffiness about his face. His moustache gave him a faintly Spanish look, but his eyes were passionless.

"Don't cant, Nan," Dick said roughly. He looked around, brushed an arm over a stool and bowed low. "Sit down, Harry."

Lord Southampton sprawled gracefully, his long legs stretched out to the fire, steam rising from the wet hose. "We have been to the play," he drawled. "They're playing *The Venetian Comedy* at the Rose." He spoke to Mall, ignoring Nan, who bristled from head to foot like an angry hedgepig, her arms akimbo, speech burning on her tongue.

Mall saw that, short of insulting them, they would have to put up with this intrusion until Lord Southampton wearied of the amusement of mocking them, so she sat down on the stool opposite him and picked up the iron shovel.

"Chestnuts, my lord?"

He glanced at the shovel and laughed, suddenly looking his age, a boy of nineteen or so with an adolescent inability to control his own selfish impulses.

"Hot chestnuts? I have not eaten them for an age. Yes, give me some . . ."

She shovelled some into his hands, wickedly pleased to see him cry out and fumble them into his lap, shaking his burned fingers in the air to cool them.

She heard a soft sound and looked up to see the other

man's full lips smiling. His blue eyes twinkled at her.

Dick was disturbed. "Butter," he said agitatedly. "Butter for my lord's fingers. You're careless, Mall. You have burnt him."

"Serves him right," Nan muttered.

Southampton threw the chestnuts to the floor and stood up. "Come, Will," he said to the third man. "It seems we are not welcome here." He threw Mall a spiteful look. "I'll remember you, Mistress."

Mall swept him a curtsy. "I am all gratitude, my lord."

He glared, biting his lip like an offended girl, tossed the rich curls and stalked out, the firelight turning his hair to red gold. Dick anxiously followed him, pouring out apologies.

The man called Will paused to look down at Mall, his slanting eyes narrowed to blue points of light. "You've made an enemy, Mistress Fytton."

Mall shrugged. "I did not like his lordship's manner."

"It was bestowed on him at his birth," the man said softly. "You will see much of it at court. My lord Southampton and Lord Essex are powerful friends and dangerous enemies. I would not wish you to suffer from their enmity. Try when you next see him to flatter and cajole him."

Her dark eyes looked scornfully at him.

He smiled faintly again. "Oh, he may encourage the adoration of such as your brother but he has other instincts to which he gives full rein. He is not adverse to the smiles of a pretty girl."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"That astonishes you? The heart of a man is not as easy to read as a book," he said. "You have much to learn."

When he had gone Nan angrily waved her handkerchief to dispel the lingering odour of Lord Southampton's perfume, and brushed the stool he sat on with a distasteful hand.

"What is our brother come to?" Her lip twisted in disgust. "My poor mother."

"Mother sees nothing she does not want to see."

"How can you speak of her so rudely?" Nan bridled instantly, her full face flushed and angry. "How could she guess the manner of creature Dick has become?"

Mall did not answer. Their mother was no innocent. She had been to and fro London for years. She knew the court and the ways of the corrupt creatures which inhabited it. If she did not know what had become of Dick it was because she did

not want to know it. He was high in Lord Southampton's favour. That was all she cared for—Dick would advance with such a patron to push him on, and Lady Fytton cared for nothing else. The Fytton passion for advancement was too strong in her for any moral qualms to raise their heads.

"Who was that other man?" Mall asked, gazing into the heart of the fire. The sea-coal which Londoners used instead of logs burnt with a steady, flickering glow, and in the blue-green flames she saw pictures dance—she saw again the high, domed forehead, the luminous eyes, the full red mouth beneath its auburn moustache.

Nan shrugged crossly. "Some low fellow. He had a country burr. He was no gentleman, that's sure."

"I thought him gentle enough," Mall said softly.

"In London every Jack-come-lately thinks himself a gentleman," Nan spat.

Outside the watch shouted the hour, the dark street briefly lightened by their lanterns. Nan yawned.

"Time for bed."

"I'll wait up to see my father," Mall said.

Nan smiled, suddenly loving again. "I had forgot. You must be anxious to hear their news. Do not build your hopes too high, Mall. The Queen is contrary. The more our father pushes his claims, the more she may withhold her favour."

"Even so, I cannot sleep until I know what news they bring," she said.

A short time later they entered the chamber, soaked to the skin and splashed with filth from the gutters. Lady Fytton shivered and held her hands out to the fire. Nan, wrapped in a warm robe, her bedgown beneath it, poked her head out between the bed-curtains to greet them. Mall was still sitting on the stool by the hearth, her face rosy with sleep and warmth.

Sir Edward looked cheerfully at her. "Good news, child. Sir William Knollys is in hope you will have a place at court before the spring next year. The Queen has clapped Lady Bridget's husband in the Fleet prison and Lady Bridget herself is under chamber arrest. When the dust of the affair has cleared, Sir William promises you will have her place. We must be patient, that is all."

"Oh, Father!" She clasped her hands to her hot face. "Oh, Father . . ."

"Better news yet," he went on. "I met Dick Leveson at

supper and he invites us to sup with him tomorrow. There will be other guests—including Master Cecil, Lord Burleigh's son. It can do you no harm to be known to him. He will step into his father's shoes one day. No man knows the court better."

"Dick Leveson," Mall whispered, turning her nails into her palms in her effort to be appear calm.

"You remember our cousin Leveson?" Her father smiled. "He is a plain, simple sailor, Dick, but a good fellow for all that."

"Yes," she said hoarsely. "I remember him."

Her father looked at her searchingly. "You have not caught a chill? You sound dry."

"I'm tired," she said. "That is all."

CHAPTER SEVEN

RICHARD WAS THINNER than ever, the bones beneath his skin seeming to stand out with angular insistence. Beneath his thick brows the brown eyes glowed gently at her, a smile in their depths. He held her hand briefly, looking down at her, then bent suddenly to kiss the back of it, his moustache brushing her flesh, sending a shiver down her back. As he straightened he turned away to greet Nan, who held out both hands.

"Cousin Dick! It is a long time."

"Too long," he said, bending to kiss her warmly on her upturned mouth. Mall envied Nan the uncomplicated friendliness which could exchange such kisses. Her own hunger for such warm physical contact somehow made it impossible for her to invite it. She was always conscious of an overpowering need which might make her seem too-eager, and so she held back. Rather be thought cold than be known as a wanton. Her mother's icy reserve towards her had made her chary of rejection.

Sir Edward and Lady Fytton were already standing beside the great hearth talking to the other guests. It was a small party. They would sit down to table unevenly, since there was one man spare—a short, slight bowed man with a dark, clever face and mobile eyes who wore sombre but magnificent dress. A single heavy chain of gold hung round his neck. As he turned his head Mall saw he had one shoulder slightly higher than the other, and knew at once who he was, especially when she noticed that he smiled a good deal yet left a distinct chill upon the air around him.

"We are to have some potatoes roasted in the embers," Richard said, pointing to the fire. Beneath the great iron cage which held the logs they could see the shapes of potatoes baking among the ashes. Richard bent forward and raked them out with an iron tong. The rain had ruined the potato

harvests that year, as it had the wheat, but these were sweet, if rather small, and served with melted butter and salt they were delicious. Laughing, they ate them held in napkins, smearing their chins with butter. Even Robert Cecil seemed to find the game delightful. His narrow dark eyes glinted with amusement as he delicatedly nibbled his potato.

"Did you see Lopez executed?" Sir Edward asked him.

Cecil shrugged his padded shoulders. "I had to be there. It was necessary."

"I've heard he said he loved Her Grace as much as he loved Jesus Christ," Sir Edward said, grinning.

Lady Fytton crossly broke in, "An evil man! When everyone knew he was a Jew!"

"He had an ironic sense of humour, my Lady," Cecil said softly. "I liked the man. But he had to die."

"Of course he did. He was found guilty," Lady Fytton said suspiciously, as though believing him to dispute the sentence.

Cecil smiled that chill little smile. "He was accused. That was his mistake. The verdict was inevitable with Lord Essex as his accuser."

Sir Edward leaned forward confidentially. "Essex is very popular with the people. Since we arrived I've heard a dozen people singing that song they've made on him . . ."

Cecil hummed it softly. "Bonny sweet Robin is England's joy . . ." He slid his dark glance around the watching circle. "Yes, my Lord Essex has many friends and only one enemy he need fear . . ."

"Who is that?" asked Sir Edward with bated breath.

Cecil smiled, showing yellow teeth. "Himself."

Henry Carey threw his potato skin into the fire and watched the flames leap up to consume it. "Lord Essex frightens me. He is handsome, charming, clever . . . and dangerous."

"Hush," Cecil said, still smiling. "Walls have ears, Henry. And Essex has a long memory."

"Young Southampton is totally under his spell," Henry went on unheeding. "They go everywhere together."

"Not everywhere," said Nan grimly, then blushed as all eyes turned on her in surprise.

"What can you mean, Mistress Nan?" asked Cecil, his eyes narrowed in curiosity.

"Lord Southampton visited us yesterday," Nan said, her voice flustered. She looked very pretty and very nervous as

she glanced at her astonished parents. "I forgot to tell you. Dick brought him to visit us."

Lady Fytton looked excited, her cheekbones taking on a high colour. "And we were out! Oh, why did you not bid them wait until we returned? What must Lord Southampton think of us?"

"What did *you* think of Lord Southampton, Mistress Nan?" asked Henry Carey slyly.

She glanced at him directly, her face set. "I did not like him."

"Nan!" Lady Fytton turned crimson with fury.

"No, no," Cecil intervened softly. "She is an honest child. Let her stay so as long as she can. We do not see much honesty at court." For a moment there was genuine warmth in his face as he looked at Nan. "Your husband is to be congratulated. He is a happy man."

Nan looked down, her lashes fluttering.

"He is, indeed," said Henry Carey flatly, watching her.

The supper was announced and they made their way to the table. It was heavily laden with rich foods. The silver candlesticks stood down the centre of the table, fruit piled round their bases, the flames reflected in the polished skins of apples and oranges. The dishes were elaborately dressed and coated with rich sauces. The servants moved behind their chairs deftly handing dishes up and down the table, filling their cups with wine and proffering finger-bowls filled with fragrant rose-water.

Mall found herself facing Robert Cecil with Richard on her left, at the head of the table, and Henry Carey on her right. Her mother had been asked to take the seat at the foot of the table, and the compliment had pleased her, so that she was pleasant and cheerful throughout the meal.

While Robert Cecil turned to talk to Sir Edward, Richard smiled at Mall. "How did you enjoy your time with Bess of Shrewsbury?"

"Very much," she said politely.

He lifted a ragged eyebrow. "Really? They say she is an old crow for ever pecking out lambs' eyes. Was she kind to you? You must have a magic touch."

"I liked and respected her," Mall said.

His brown eyes smiled. "Still the same warm, generous child, Mall?"

Her eyes dropped to her plate and her colour deepened. He

leaned forward to select a slice of pheasant pasty, his hand gently brushing hers in passing. "I am sorry if I embarrassed you," he said under his breath. "You look so lovely you took my breath away. You have fulfilled the promise of your childhood, Mall. You are a black swan."

Her heart beat against the heavy damascened cloth of her gown. She lifted her eyes slowly until they met his. The deep intentness of his gaze made her breathless.

Then Robert Cecil turned away from her father and looked across the table. Shaken and rosy pink, she tore her eyes from Richard to force a smile at Cecil.

The little man's black brows lifted. He gave Richard a quick, curious look, then turned back to smile at her crookedly.

"So we may hope to see you at court, Mistress Mary. I shall look forward to that pleasure. I hope you are patient and long-suffering. The Queen is not an easy mistress to serve. She grows old and her temper is not good. You must bear with her."

"I shall be happy to serve Her Grace," Mall said quietly. She had learnt to be patient under adversity in her earliest years. She did not think the Queen could try her beyond her bearing.

"The Queen is a goddess we all love to serve," Richard said lightly. "We cannot expect the gods to deal lightly with us."

"Your sister told us she did not like Lord Southampton," Cecil said. "But you said nothing. What did you think of him?"

Mall's cheeks dimpled. "I thought him very pretty," she said softly.

Cecil laughed in his throat. "Oh, indeed. One of our players has written him a long poem in which he appears as Adonis with Venus herself madly enamoured of him and he repudiating her with a sullen pout . . ."

"Yes, that sounds like him," Mall said, nodding.

"It is a beautiful piece of work," said Richard. "I've a copy here somewhere. I've read it several times. Shakespeare is a fine poet. His plays are very popular, too." He smiled at her. "Have you been to the play yet?"

She shook her head.

"Then we must take you," he said at once. "Unluckily, Shakespeare is with the Lord Chamberlain's men and they do not open in a new play until October, so you will not see him. They are playing *Palamon and Arcite* at the Rose tomorrow afternoon. It is a new play. You will like it, I think."

"If you met Lord Southampton you were unlucky not to meet Shakespeare," Cecil drawled, smiling a triangular cat's smile. "The player haunts his master's footsteps like a dog hoping for a bone or two."

Henry Carey turned his head and looked at them sideways with a grin. "Will is full of little snobberies but he's a sweet, gentle soul, all the same, sir."

"Will?" said Mall, frowning. "There was a gentleman with my lord whom they called Will . . . a small man with a very high forehead and auburn hair. A quiet gentleman." She did not think it could be this player whom they all seemed to know. Her father had told her all actors were crude, noisy braggarts.

"That's him," said Richard, smiling.

"My lord Southampton goes nowhere without his train of catamites," Cecil said silkily.

Mall looked, appalled, along the table. Lady Fytton was eating a chicken leg, her cheeks fire red. She did not look up. Mall saw that she had heard. Heard and understood.

Richard's brown eyes were anxious as he gestured to a servant to refill Mall's wine cup. "How were the roads from Cheshire?" he asked hastily. "This rain makes travel impossible."

Later while Cecil talked to their parents, Nan and Mall walked in the gallery with Richard and Henry Carey. Somehow they fell into pairs. Nan and Henry stood at the window watching the rain fall endlessly. Mall and Richard walked to and fro with a pack of restless dogs at their heels.

"How is your wife?" she asked him tentatively.

"The same," he said curtly.

"I am sorry."

He shrugged. "So am I."

"Can nothing be done?"

"Nothing. At least she gets no worse. Her parents feel it more than I do. I think her father throws himself into work to keep his mind from dwelling on her."

"How do you cope with the problem?" she asked him.

"The same way, I suppose. At sea one finds it easy to forget even the worst of problems." His brown eyes shone. "At dawn in a pearly mist I've sometimes heard gulls crying far off, and then sometimes I think of Margaret. But the mist lifts and the sea stretches for miles and I feel myself slowly calming to the swell of the waters . . ." He leaned against the window frame in a shadowy alcove, his face in pro-

file. "Then I sometimes find myself thinking of you."

"Of me?" She stood tensely watching him. "What do you think?"

He glanced over his shoulder at Nan and Henry, their figures just visible at the other end of the gallery in the flickering fire light.

"It would be best you do not know," he said thickly.

She moved closer, her skirts rustling against his thighs. "Tell me," she pleaded.

He sat down on the windowsill, arms folded. He was now out of sight of Nan and Henry. The angle of the alcove made the windowseat invisible to them.

Richard stared at her, the centres of his brown eyes lit with orange flame.

"You're so young, Mall. If only I were free . . . But I'm not and never can be. My dreams are best kept to myself."

She sat down beside him and put a hand over his, feeling the coldness of his flesh like a benison to her fevered imagination.

"Richard, kiss me . . ."

He turned to look at her, his face tortured with doubt and desire.

"My sweet little dove, don't tempt me."

"I need you," she said in a hurried whisper. "All my life I've wanted to be loved. I'm so cold, so shut out, Richard . . . warm me . . ."

Her fingers moved against his hand, crept like little shivering mice under his cuff and stroked his wrist, feeling the beating of the invisible pulse in the blue vein.

He gave a thick, stifled groan and turned, bending down. She moved towards him in an instant, and their mouths met, as they had once before in the summerhouse at Gawsworth. She had dreamt of this closeness for years. Her hands flew up to clasp his neck, sliding beneath his ruff to find the warmth of his body. Her lips parted moistly beneath the hard pressure of his, the sensation arousing new emotions in her. Something between pain and pleasure, a new heat sprang up deep within her body, making her shake as though with fever.

"Oh, God, I want you," Richard whispered hoarsely, his hands at her low bodice, shaping the softness of her breasts. She swayed closer, shuddering, the movements of his hands arousing her to hot intensity. The open hunger in his voice made her shake with a total response she barely comprehended.

The dogs began to bark. Richard shot away, flushed and anxious. Behind her she heard Nan's voice. Richard answered huskily. She put shaking hands to her hair, the slow hot pulsing in her body ebbing. She did not want it to go. She wanted to experience those moments over again. Awakened to a realisation of how sweet passion could be, she was hungry for more. She began to scheme, to plan some way in which they could be alone. Her passion had been fanned to such a blaze that only consummation could make it possible to bear life.

Somehow she turned round and made light conversation with Nan and Henry Carey. Once she caught Henry looking at Nan, and suspected more warmth in his eyes than should be there, but Nan appeared quite unconscious of it. Richard avoided her eyes altogether. She saw he was horrified by how far things had gone between them. Richard was a man of principle. He would not find it easy to forget the rules of social life. Society protected itself by erecting barriers to stop men from seducing innocent girls. Richard was conventional enough to believe in those barriers. Mall saw that she would have a struggle to convince him that he should break down the barriers separating them. But somehow she was determined to succeed. She could not bear to go on living if she was never to know again the fierce sweetness of his lovemaking.

They went home at a late hour, challenged by the watch a few yards from their door, and Nan was already half asleep when they snuggled up in their shared bed.

Lazily, Mall asked her, "Do you like Henry Carey?"

"Mm . . . very nice . . ." Nan said, yawning.

"He likes you," Mall said pointedly.

Nan giggled. "Silly!"

"He couldn't take his eyes off you."

"I'm a married woman, Mall!"

"He knew you were. It seemed to make no difference."

"Oh, well! You know what court gallants are!" Yet Nan had a satisfied sound to her voice.

"No! Tell me!"

"Get off with you, then. You know very well. Cozening wretches. They are only after one thing."

"What's that?" Mall asked in pretended innocence.

"A slice of someone else's apple, usually," Nan said, laughing silently so that her body shook in the bed.

Mall lay thinking. "Has anyone ever asked you to . . ."

"Bed with him? Fool, what do you think? It is all a game."

"What do you say to them?" Mall tried to imagine Nan being seduced and failed. It was hard to imagine such a thing. Nan was so familiar to her. Easier to imagine the bedpost being seduced.

Nan giggled again. "I tell them to take their sweetmeats and give them to a dairy maid for I'll none of them."

"Is that what you said to Henry Carey tonight?" Mall asked thoughtfully.

Nan stretched sleepily. "Oh, Henry is not so crude. And all the more dangerous for that. If I were not wed I might . . ." She bit the words off.

"What, Nan?"

Nan turned over. "Go to sleep, Mall. I'm so tired my eyeballs are popping."

Her every waking moment was spent in weaving webs in which she might ensnare Richard, but she was too closely guarded to get a chance to see him again. The proposed visit to the Rose had to be cancelled because her parents were again invited to sup with Sir William Knollys. Two days later the endless rain stopped and, while it was possible to ride, her father decided to head for Cheshire again.

"We cannot stop in London for ever. I've achieved as much as I can for the moment. Until the Queen decides to appoint a new Maid of Honour we must wait patiently."

"I'm sick of patience," said Lady Fytton. "Edward, should we not call on Lord Southampton to return the call he so kindly made on us? It is only polite."

"No," said Sir Edward shortly. "I'll not see that puppy." His face set like stone. "No."

Lady Fytton bit her lip. "He is a great nobleman and unwed . . ."

Her husband looked at her scornfully. "Do not be such a fool, woman."

"Mall may have to wait for ever for a court post . . ."

"I would rather wed her to one of my own grooms than see her wed to that pervert!"

Lady Fytton went white. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish's maw and then she walked fast out of the room. That afternoon Dick called on them, but Sir Edward coldly sent down word that they were out. Mall stood by the window,

watching her brother ride away. Something in the set of his shoulders told her that he knew they were at home. Tears trickled down her face.

The journey back to Cheshire took two weeks. Each mile was covered slowly. They were plastered with mud from head to foot, chilled, aching, their clothes ruined and their bones almost cracking with the constant jolt-jolt-jolt of the horses. Some parts of the road were so swampy that they had to walk round them on the water-logged fields. Several times they were attacked by highwaymen who had to be driven off by their servants by pistol shots.

The whole of England was full of discontent. The constant alarums of the past years had meant that more and more men were called to fight in the Queen's army for a few months, and, when discharged, seemed to find it hard to settle down once more to their former quiet life. Restless, disaffected soldiers roamed the countryside, living by roguery and theft. The high price of food added to the general discontent. Hungry men were easy game for malcontents eager to stir up trouble. Riots took place in most of the towns.

"England is falling apart," said Sir Edward. "What has happened to us all? I've never seen so many masterless men, all ripe for mischief."

"Or so many hungry children," said Mall, staring at a little group of dirty, scarecrow children huddled by a row of cottages. Their thin, pale faces grimed with mud they held up pleading hands for aid, and she threw them some halfpence, only to be sickened to see how they fought and screamed in the filth of the gutter to get a coin.

"Don't give them alms," said her mother sharply. "Do you want to bring the whole hive around our ears?"

Sir Edward whipped up the horses and the weary beasts responded as best they could, taking them out into the empty desolate countryside once more.

When they reached Gawsworth at last Mall was retching with road sickness and even Nan was white and silent. After long, warm baths they went to bed and slept for a full twenty-four hours.

The deep of winter succeeded rainy autumn. Just before Christmas came a letter from Sir William Knollys informing them that the Queen had commanded him to summon Mall to take a place as Maid of Honour at the court in the following spring. He added a postscript about the revels which had

taken place at Gray's Inn—wild scenes of revelry, he added disapprovingly. Not fit for such solemn halls.

Nan received a letter from Henry Carey enclosing a Christmas gift—a pair of fine silk gloves embroidered with her initials. Lady Fytton admired them but gave Nan a curious, doubtful look. Mall wondered if she suspected Nan's virtue.

Dick wrote to Mall, enclosing his gift, a beaded purse. His letter was full of London news. Dick had been with Lord Southampton to Greenwich Palace on St. Stephen's Day to see Shakespeare's company acting before the Queen. Her Grace had been well pleased and had given them a purse of gold. He also mentioned the Gray's Inn revels. The students had elected one of themselves as Prince, and a time of misrule had begun, with plays and feasts and riotous merriment in the London streets, causing much irritation to the city merchants who disliked all pleasure on principle.

The New Year began with heavy snow. The Thames was frozen over and the city pedlars moved stalls on to the ice to sell trinkets to skating merry-makers. Braziers appeared. Hot chestnuts were sold. Baked apples too. The slow-running river took on a gay appearance for a while. The watermen petitioned the Council for help—while the river was frozen they got no fares and were starving.

Spring came slowly, reluctantly. They set off for court one crisp March morning over roads cracking with ice. Thin shivering blades of green showed in the fields. The new lambs seemed smaller and weaker than in other springs. Ahead of them all lay a city torn with rioting and misery. Food prices were still spiralling upward. The people could not help but believe someone was to blame. They suspected rich merchants of making a profit from their misery. They suspected courtiers of plundering them by monopolies. They were daily more discontented.

They reached their lodgings in Greenwich just before noon and were able to partake of the tavern dinner—a poor meal of stewed eels, poached rabbit and rye bread, but better than nothing. Mall's boxes were taken to the Palace while her family were eating. She could hardly touch a mouthful of food. Her nerves were jumping as she pushed her plate away barely touched.

Her father smiled at her. "Nervous, child?"

"A little," she admitted.

"The Queen can be very gracious," he said reassuringly.

"Be modest and gentle, Mall, and you will do very well."

A tap on the door and Henry Carey put his head round, smiling, his eyes seeking out Nan, who blushed a little and pretended to be busy with her wine.

Lady Fytton gave him a cold look. "I am surprised to see you here, Master Carey. It is good of you to spare some of your no doubt valuable time to welcome us, but pray, do not let us detain you from more pressing business." She had made it her business to discover his background and had been irritated to discover that Richard Leveson had introduced to them one of the Carey bastards, of good family but no fortune since he had been born beyond the pale. His obvious interest in Nan made him dangerous, particularly at this point in time, since Nan was just about to enter married life at last. When they had safely bestowed Mall at court, they were all to journey to Arbury to take Nan to her husband.

Henry Carey took her chill manners in good humour. Bowing, he smiled and said he had come to invite Mistress Newdegate to join himself and his married sister Joan on a trip up river to Whitehall.

"It is a pretty sight from the river," he added.

Lady Fytton bridled. "You are very kind but it would not be suitable."

"My sister and I have been invited to sup at Essex House this evening," he added softly. "I wondered if Mistress Newdegate would care to join us."

Sir Edward's cool smile spread into a warm glance. "I am sure my daughter would be honoured," he said. "We are related to Lord Essex, as you no doubt realise, since my daughter's husband is a connection of Sir William Knollys, my Lord's uncle . . ." He lifted his shoulders proudly. "Sir William is a good friend of mine, I may say . . ."

Lady Fytton looked at Nan's gown anxiously. "If you are to sup at Essex House, child, you must change. That gown is not fit to be seen in polite company."

Nan, eyes dancing, hugged Mall. "Good fortune, sister. Sweet Mall, write to me at Arbury often."

"And you to me. I shall be eager to hear how you like married life," Mall said.

Henry Carey's eyes followed Nan as she left the room to change. His face was melancholy. Mall wondered how seriously he felt about Nan, and pitied him.

"We must go," said Sir Edward, clearing his throat.

"You must not be late on your first day at court, Mall."

Lady Fytton anxiously surveyed her. She was wearing her best new gown, her hair braided high above her great ruff, ropes of pearls strung around her white throat.

"You will do," she sighed.

Mall hesitated, wondering if she were expected to kiss her mother, but Lady Fytton made no move to come closer. They were to part here, since Lady Fytton was not expected to appear at the Palace with her. For a few seconds they faced each other. Mall felt a chill premonition that she might never see her mother again as a child. Their paths now separated, perhaps for ever. For one wild moment she longed to be held in her mother's arms, kissed, shown some love or warmth. Then she turned away stiffly, recognising that there was nothing there for her but pain.

"I am ready, Father," she said.

The usual approach to Greenwich Palace was by river, since there was a great gatehouse adjoining the river bank, at which the Queen normally arrived in her state barge, rowed by some twenty oarsmen, the royal standard floating overhead and the sound of music drifting across the water. The gilt of the wooden prow, the scarlet and gold of the liveries, the white of following swans, were reflected in the river as the barge passed, cheered by the people crowding to the banks to see it pass.

Mall and her father, however, turned into one of the park gates from the land and made their way towards the great spread of buildings which constituted the Palace itself. On all sides the close-cropped turf and trees made the prospect delightful. Through the trees the silver-grey waters of the Thames sparkled in spring sunlight A few gulls with yellow beaks screamed and dived through the trees. In the distance they saw a troop of ladies and gentlemen on horseback riding towards the river beneath the trees. Plumes and gay habits made the procession colourful.

Mall saw a little cluster of girls scurrying towards the gatehouse and wondered if they were Maids of Honour. Soon she would know them all, be one of them. The prospect alarmed her.

They were challenged as they approached the great door. A liveried servant took them in charge and showed them deferentially to Sir William Knollys's chamber. As Controller of the Royal Household Sir William had to keep his finger on

the pulse of every day to day detail of court life. He was in charge of the staff and servants, and kept the palace accounts, no easy task when he served an irritable and demanding mistress.

He came to greet them, smiling gravely; a tall, greying man with an expression of pompous self-conceit, wearing clothes in the highest fashion, rich yet somehow gaudy, so that he looked, as the common people said, like "mutton dressed as lamb". On a young man the fashionable clothes might have looked exquisite. On Sir William they looked absurd—his shoulders over-padded, his breeches puffed out above his skinny thighs so that he seemed to waddle like a duck as he walked.

He bowed with many graceful signs to Mall, then turned to greet her father.

"Friend Fytton, I am happy to see this day, and you need not fear to leave your most precious lamb in my charge, for I shall play the Good Shepherd to her and defend her from the subtle foxes of this place."

"You are most kind," her father said. "I shall take it kindly, I promise you. She is my ewe lamb and very dear to me."

"And shall be dear to me, I promise you, as dear as though she were my own daughter." He turned back to Mall, and she felt his eyes move over her. Then he took her hand and kissed it, his mouth open so that she felt the moistness of his tongue. "I feel a pure, fatherly love for her already," he said. "Come, daughter, let us kiss and be friends . . ."

Reluctantly, with distaste she had to submit to being embraced, to let him kiss her first on the cheeks then on the mouth, his lips hot and wet as they pressed against hers.

Still holding her, an arm around her waist, he said, "Be warned, sweet innocent. You have come to the core of corruption now."

Mall lowered her eyes demurely, sickened by his smell, a heady fragrance of violets and the scent of old flesh not over-clean.

Sir William Knollys was fifty years old and had spent most of his life in the service of his Queen and cousin, so that he had a high opinion of himself and his position in life. Vain, selfish, pompous, fond of the sound of his own voice, he had a passion for pretty women which he had had to suppress for years since the Queen was very strict about morality at court and any lapse on his part might have ended his career. His

wife was older than himself, a permanent invalid whom he had married late in life and of whom he longed to be delivered so that he might at last indulge his yearning for the white flesh of young girls.

His hot eyes ran over Mall's slender body hungrily. She was a striking creature, he thought avidly. That coal-black hair, those jet eyes, the sensuous red lips and white, white skin . . . She aroused in him a burning hunger. He looked at the white cleft of her breasts, just visible above her bodice, and his tongue slipped out to moisten his parted lips. He thought of her tiny waist and the hidden swell of her hips and thighs, and began to wonder how much longer he would have to wait for his old wife to die.

Sir Edward drew him aside into the window embrasure. Lowering his voice he whispered, "Friend Will, you know I long to see my girl well bestowed. If a suitable marriage presents itself, pray write to me at once. My object in getting her this place is to find her a good husband."

"Very admirable," Sir William intoned nasally. He looked round at Mall and lust burned in him again. She was standing demurely, eyes lowered, hands folded at her waist, the very picture of sweet virginity, and Sir William's hot imagination prompted an image of himself teaching her delights she had probably never suspected could exist.

"She is very bedworthy," he said thickly, licking his lips. "You should not have any difficulty finding a husband." And why not myself, he thought? He glanced at Sir Edward, hesitated, then added, "If I were free, I would myself . . ." He laughed falsely, making light of it. "Alas, as you know, I am still a married man." His voice quickened to hurry over the next words. The hint must be lightly given yet it must be taken. "My wife is old, though, and fit to die at any moment and when she has passed to her heavenly rest I will be a free man once more."

Sir Edward regarded him with astonishment, his jaw sagging. He could not help but get the point, and his eyes probed Sir William's flushed, restless face. Was Knollys serious? Quick as lightning, his thoughts moved. Knollys would be a great catch. He was wealthy enough, God knew, and as the Queen's cousin his position was assured. Even more, if when the Queen died Lord Essex should mount to the throne—as was barely possible—then Knollys would be the King's uncle, a position even more unassailable. Yes, Knollys was certainly

a great catch. But he was old. Sir Edward controlled a grimace of distaste. Knollys was older than himself, for God's sake. He glanced at Mall doubtfully and his eyes softened. She was his favourite child now. Once he had loved his sons above all else. But Ned had married to spite him, and Dick . . . well, the less said about Dick the better. Nan was a good girl, but she had never been a great beauty, though a warm, sweet child. Mall . . . Mall was still full of possibilities; lovely and gentle, offering him the affection he had not found in the others. How could he give her to this rank old man?

But then Knollys was too important to offend. He turned to him, smiling fulsomely, "You do us much honour, sir."

Knollys had been watching him anxiously. Now he smiled, too. "You will bear it in mind?"

"Most gratefully, sir," said Sir Edward jovially. "One day I shall hope to call you son-in-law . . ."

"And I to name you by that sweetest name of Father," said Knollys, once more restored to full pomposity.

Mall had not heard any of this exchange until now. Lost in dreams of court life she suddenly came back to the present to catch the last few words and be puzzled and alarmed by them.

"If you will wait here for one moment," said Knollys. "I will see if Her Grace is ready to receive you."

When the door had closed behind him, Sir Edward moved to his daughter and looked down at her soberly, his brow creased.

"What is it, Father?"

"Child, I have a delicate duty to perform. You must listen very carefully. I think you are old enough to understand me. Sir William Knollys has just made an oblique proposal for your hand . . ."

Her eyes flashed to his face in horror and dismay.

He held up a warning hand, glancing at the door. "Walls have ears," he whispered, bending closer. "Be silent. Listen well." Then, raising his voice, he added, "We are most honoured by the suggestion, of course. Sir William's wife is ill and may die at any time, but her illness is a lingering one. She may live for years. Only God knows. For the present I wish you to be your own sweet, gentle self with Sir William. Show him all honour and duty. I wish you to please him however you can at all times. He is the Queen's cousin and dear to her. The match would raise you in the world."

Mall's lip was trembling. She bit it to control a desire to

cry. She thought of the greybearded face, the hot eyes and fulsome speech of old Knollys and the thought of being his wife made her feel sick.

Her father drew her towards the window and bent to whisper in her ear. "Try to be brave, dearest child. You must be clever now. Flirt with him. Encourage him. But guard yourself and give him no promises. You are not for him, I swear it. I would not give you to him if he were the King himself . . ."

Relief flooded her. She closed her eyes, leaning her head on his shoulder. He hugged her, and when she looked up winked at her.

Aloud he said, "I know you will do just as I wish, my dear girl."

"Of course, Father," she said, as evenly as she could. "I shall respect and honour Sir William to the best of my ability."

Sir Edward winked at her again. Under his breath he whispered, "The old goat . . ."

A moment later Sir William returned, carrying his white stick of office, glittering and magnificent in black silk and gold chains, his posture swaggering and self-aware.

"Pray follow me," he told them proudly. "Her Grace will see you now . . ."

Along narrow corridors crowded with servants and gentlemen they passed in stately procession. People moved out of the way and stared as they walked by, whispering, their curious eyes on Mall. She had never seen so many people in one place before. Surely the whole of London must be here. It was not always easy to tell the gentlemen from the servants since both wore such fine clothes. At times one bolder than the rest would press forward to catch Sir William's notice, pressing a paper into his hand, or muttering to him some private petition which he desired to put before the Queen, and then Sir William would say loftily, "Pray, sirrah, another day. I am not in the mood to hear you today." Back they would fall, their faces sullen, and Sir William would move on again in his stately fashion.

Then they were in the last ante-chamber, a room packed to the walls with richly dressed people, and Mall felt her cheeks burning under the impact of so many eyes.

Sir William seemed above such curiosity. He moved through

the throng, gesturing with his white stick as he walked, and a path opened magically before him. Two sentries stood to guard the royal door. Sir William tapped with his white stick upon it. A sentry threw it open and Sir William advanced.

Mall followed, her skirts rustling so loudly in her own ears that she grew more terrified. They walked into the Presence Chamber slowly. Greatly daring, Mall lifted her eyes and gasped.

From a distance she resembled the moon, a remote figure stiffly encased in silver gauze, glittering with gems, her head appearing to be suspended above an enormous, silver-dusted ruff. She burned upon the air with a barbaric splendour. Pearls gleamed milkily in the cascade of bright red curls which fell almost to her shoulders. Long pale hands moved restlessly against her spread skirts, plucking at the material, beating on the arms of her gilded chair. It was impossible to see the woman beneath all that ritualistic beauty. The façade shone so brilliantly one was dazzled.

Mall walked somehow, but she was shaking, her eyes darting nervously around the chamber. When they halted she automatically sank into her lowest curtsy, her head bent. At her side her father knelt on one knee. Out of the corner of her eye she could just see the glinting silver buckle on his shoe.

"Let me see your face, child," the Queen commanded. "Stand up." Her voice was timbred hoarsely as though she had a cold, but it was charged with a natural majesty, born of years of authority.

Mall slowly rose and lifted her head. The brightness blinded her for an instant, like looking into the sun, then her sight cleared and she saw a long, pale wrinkled face; eyes of an indeterminate grey, a mouth reddened by artificial means. The bright red curls were plainly false on closer inspection. The Queen wore a wig. Under it her face looked sharp, her cheekbones sunken, her nose long and hooked.

She is old, Mall thought, with surprise. Then asked herself why she should have been taken by surprise. After all, she had always known the Queen's age. For years her family had dreaded the Queen's death since she was already past the age at which women were expected to sicken and die. Yet the national image of the Queen was stronger than the facts. The myth survived reality. She was pictured as a goddess above the ravages of time, and that was what Mall had expected to see today. That was what she had seen for a few moments, at

a distance, as the people saw her—a shining deity, glittering and powerful.

And instead she was just an old woman with yellow teeth and bad breath.

The Queen's keen eyes moved over Mall slowly, taking in each detail. She was wearing the most splendid dress she had ever worn—the cannon sleeves were thickly encrusted with semi-precious stones and ended in a small lace cuff which fell becomingly over her white hand. The frounced farthingale skirt gave a satisfying bounce to her step, swaying as she moved, giving her body an entrancing grace. Her low bodice tapered to a point below the waist. Loops of pearls glowed against her white throat. Her black hair was dressed with yet more pearls. She stood calmly under the Queen's scrutiny, her hands linked at her waist, her back straight, head high.

"I have had good report of you from my Lady Shrewsbury," the hoarse voice said. "I hope you will remember all she taught you. My ladies must be modest, of good decorum and obedient."

"Yes, your Grace," she said humbly.

The Queen studied her narrowly, then nodded. "I hope you continue quiet and modest, Mistress. You girls come here like little mice and overnight become wild cats . . ."

She flicked open a black lace fan and moved it slowly, glancing at Sir Edward. "Well, how stands Cheshire, good Fytton?"

"Peaceful, thanks be to God and your Grace," Sir Edward said humbly, bowing again.

The Queen clicked shut her fan and tapped with it upon the arm of her chair. "I do not call it peace when the gentry feud openly over a parcel of barren land, Sir Edward!"

He looked aghast. He had not expected her to have heard anything of the latest of the intermittent local feuds which had broken out between the Fyttons and another Cheshire family over the usual problem—land. The smouldering hatreds of past generations were always fanned into life when land was disputed over and it was not unknown for blood to be shed before the lumbering processes of the law could resolve the dispute.

"Do not imagine that because you are so far away I do not hear what is afoot," the Queen said with dry satisfaction. "My eyes and ears are still the sharpest in the land, Sir Edward. If a mouse stirs in Cumberland I hear it . . ." She

fanned herself again. "Let people resort to the courts if they have a quarrel. I'll not have this public brawling. God's oath, how am I to keep the peace among my commons if gentlefolk resort to arms in a quarrel? Tell them I will fetch them such a buffet their ears shall rattle." Her sharp glance made it clear that her words were not idle. "I have buffeted men's heads off for less, I warn you."

"I am your Grace's servant," Sir Edward said anxiously, going down on one knee.

"Oh, get up, get up, man," the Queen said irritably. She sighed. "They tell me I must call another Parliament to drum up money for all these wars they keep starting. You served in a Parliament once, did you not?"

"In 1588, your Grace," he said proudly. "The year of glory."

"How different in retrospect," she said faintly, the grey eyes stilled in their darting movements for a second. "Before, a dreaded climax. After, a time of glory." She sighed again. Then glanced at Mall. "Do you recall that time, child?"

"Yes, your Grace," Mall smiled nervously at her.

"What do you remember? You must have been very young. I like to hear the memories of the young. Perhaps when I am not here you will remember me."

"We all thought the world would come to an end, your Grace," Mall said. "I lay awake night after night listening for the caterpillar."

"The what?" The Queen's fine brows arched quizzically.

"Our parson preached a sermon on the caterpillar which was going about to devour the State, your Grace," said Mall mischievously. "I had nightmares about it."

Her black eyes met the Queen's narrowed grey ones. The Queen threw back her head and laughed with the rough humour of a man.

"Philip of Spain would not relish being called a caterpillar," she said with enjoyment.

Mall smiled back at her, black eyes sparkling. The Queen held out her long white hand and she moved to kiss it, noting as she did so that the Queen's naked throat and bosom were freckled with age. At such close quarters the Queen looked very old indeed.

"You remind me of someone," the Queen said huskily, staring down at her face.

"Your Grace?" Mall frowned, puzzled.

The Queen turned and gestured. From behind a screen came a young woman in a white gown who curtsied. The Queen murmured something to her, and the woman went away, returning a few moments later with a large gold box. The Queen inserted a small key, which she had on a chain around her neck, and opened it. From inside she drew out a miniature which she held out to Mall. Nervously Mall looked at it and saw a thin, high-bred, clever face with dark hair and dark eyes which were something between melancholy and wit.

"My mother," the Queen said flatly.

"She is very beautiful, your Grace," Mall said, so taken aback that she only just managed to phrase the remark.

The Queen carefully took back the minature and stared at it, then placed it back in the box and locked it again. While the box was removed, the Queen said to Sir Edward, "We are well pleased. You may safely leave your daughter in our loving care."

She held out her hand to him. He kissed it, kneeling, then he and Mall slowly backed out of the chamber, making a final curtsy before moving out of the room. Sir William Knollys reappeared at their side. He smiled patronisingly at Mall.

"A long audience. You were favoured." The brown eyes, like sucked wet pebbles, probed the curves of her body with that secret sheen of lust. "Sweet Mistress Mall, how could the Queen fail to love you? Come, let me kiss you as a father should . . ."

White lids lowered modestly she suffered him to kiss her again, the moist mouth greedy, panting for further pleasure.

Then discreetly she moved nearer her father, her shaking hand seeking his, finding it and clinging.

Court life, it seemed, would offer more problems than she had anticipated in her innocence. She had feared she might not please the Queen. Now it seemed she must fear far more being found more pleasing than was safe by those around the Queen. The court was full of wolves and lechers on the watch for unprotected lambs. Her future seemed more hazardous than she had expected.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALL AROUND HER, eyes were staring out of high-bred countenances; curious, admiring, hostile, amused, at times lascivious. It was like a nightmare she had sometimes wandered into while she slept—a terror of being watched had haunted her childhood years alongside her longing for love. At Gawsworth she had been the outsider, ignored and excluded by her mother except on those occasions when Lady Fytton coldly whipped her for some childish wrongdoing. Now the topsy-turvy world had sent her spinning into the centre of the stage, and she felt herself trembling under the impact of so many strange eyes.

To her relief the attention of the court suddenly switched from her to a newcomer who came striding across the room, his progress slowed by the necessity to greet all those who clustered to speak to him. His auburn hair flamed like a sunset above a handsome, arrogant face. Taller than any other man at court, his slim waist and hips gave him a lithely agile figure enhanced by the sheer magnificence of his white silk doublet and hose.

It did not need her father to hiss into her ear, "That's Essex." She knew at once. His myth had gone before him. Who in England did not know what he looked like?

The Queen's guards crossed their pikes in front of his face as he halted before her door. They had blank, wooden faces, yet Mall saw a flicker of nervousness in the eyes of one. It was their duty to halt any who approached yet they feared this man's anger.

Moving a little, she was able to see Lord Essex's profile, to catch the angry tightness of his mouth, the flare of red in his handsome face.

Sir William hurried forward, bowing deferentially to him. The guards stood back. Sir William disappeared into the Presence Chamber and came back a moment later to bow Lord Essex past him into the room. Essex stalked past with-

out a word or glance, and when Knollys joined them again affront stiffened his countenance.

"Insolent puppy! He thinks the Queen is at his disposal day and night. He speaks to her so rudely that when he has been with her she is not fit for other company for hours at a time." His words were whispered low in Sir Edward's ear yet Mall heard them distinctly. "My sister has spoiled him abominably. He treats me as though I were a lackey. You no doubt saw just now how low he holds me! I fear the boy has run mad with pride."

Sir Edward drew aside and spoke through the side of his mouth. "And how goes the great quarrel?"

"The Bacon problem, you mean? Oh, nothing is settled. One day the Queen seems to favour one man, the next another. Essex presses her too hard. I would not place a penny wager on the outcome. I've warned my nephew he is trying the Queen too far. I believe she is punishing Master Bacon for Robin's folly. Robin is too hot for his friends. If he pulled off and let her decide in her own time, all might be well, but he still thinks he has only to kick up enough noise for her to give way." Knollys clicked his tongue pettishly. "The lad is like a baby who thinks it has only to cry hard enough to make its mother give way."

Sir Edward nodded solemnly. "I remember that was Leicester's way and it worked for him."

Knollys smiled slyly. "She was young, then, and hot for Leicester. Now she is old and afraid of losing her kingdom. Robin mistakes the game."

Mall moved slightly, bored and restless, and the two men looked round at her.

Knollys smiled quickly. "Why, we had forgotten Mistress Mall. Come, lady, let us find the Mother of the Maids. She will show you where you are to sleep and teach you your duties."

Mall followed him obediently with her father at her back. In the corridor beyond Sir Edward took her and halted her. Sir William glanced at them and smiled.

"I'll leave you alone awhile to make your farewells, my friend. Make them brief. Time presses."

Alone, her father looked down at her soberly. "Are you afraid, child?"

"A little, Father."

"The court will seem lonely and alarming to you at first,

but you will get used to it soon. Remember how important it is to the family that you make a good impression on the Queen. Serve her willingly. Make yourself valuable to her. And try to be kind to old Knollys. We dare not offend him. Who knows what the whirligig of time may throw up? Lord Essex is a powerful force in the kingdom and Knollys is his uncle, even though he treats him with such scorn. You owe it to the family to marry well, Mall. Make no misalliances, I beg you. You are my last hope."

"I will do my best, Father," she said, tears burning behind her eyes. Her fingers clung to him as he kissed her, then he put her aside and hurried away. As he turned a corner he glanced back and she stared at him, tears on her face. He lifted a hand and was gone.

"There, there," Sir William said soothingly. "Pretty girls must not cry. They make their eyes red." He produced a kerchief and wiped her lids gently, standing close to her so she could catch that distasteful odour he carried around with him.

"Come," he said, passing a hand around her waist. "I have promised to be your father. Lean on me."

"I am brave now, sir," she said, swallowing hard. She drew away, lifting her head. "See? You are very kind."

He took her down endless corridors once more, up a long flight of stairs to a large light chamber where a middle-aged woman with a flustered, kindly face sat sewing by a window. At their entrance she looked up, then smiled.

"Is this my new charge?"

"Mary Fytton," Sir William said, inclining his head. "Her father is my dear friend. I shall stand surety for her, Mistress. She is a gentle, dutiful child, be sure."

Shrewd eyes surveyed him. "Thank you, Sir William." The tone, though polite, was firm, and he was left with no option but to leave.

The Mother of the Maids was in charge of the Maids of Honour and responsible for their conduct to the Queen. As she showed Mall the long dormitory in which they all slept she outlined the duties of each day.

"Her Grace rises early, and so do we. Breakfast is at six. Afterwards you will attend Her Grace as she takes a stroll through the gardens. She likes to keep the early morning free for relaxation before her business begins." She turned to eye Mall sternly. "Her Grace likes cheerful faces around her at

that hour. Keep your talk light. Try to amuse her but do not put her in a temper for if she begins the day ill it is the devil to pay by supper time."

Mall nodded soberly. "I understand."

"After her walk, she sees her Ministers. You will be free during that time, unless Her Grace receives an ambassador or some other person of note, when you will be required to attend her. We dine at eleven thirty. We sup at six. If Her Grace goes visiting you accompany her. If she rides or hawks you will also accompany her." She looked at Mall wearily. "You must understand that Her Grace both works and plays hard. She is no longer young, yet she sets a pace few find it easy to follow. I hope you are of strong constitution, for if you are not you will not stand the life."

"I think I am, Madam," Mall said politely.

The door burst open and a little knot of girls burst in through it, talking loudly. They halted, seeing a stranger, but were peremptorily beckoned forward.

"How many times must I tell you not to act like hoydens? Do not run. Walk and walk gracefully. Keep your eyes down modestly. Speak softly." She looked at Mall. "I hope you are listening to this, Fytton."

Mall curtsied, "Yes, Madam."

"The Queen's Grace will not tolerate lewd behaviour, nor will she bear flirtations. Of all things she most dislikes man-hunting little fools who think of nothing but marriage." She turned upon the other girls, hearing a smothered giggle from one. "I see nothing to laugh at! Stop that noise."

Their faces grew bland. "Yes, Mistress Radcliffe," they chorused tongue in cheek.

She was not deceived. Her pink face tightened with irritation. "If you came to court in search of a husband, Mistress Fytton, you may forget it! The Queen dislikes marriages between her servants. She is very strict on that point." She bustled to the door. "Margaret, take Mary Fytton under your wing." Her round flushed face was softened as she looked at one of the girls. "I know I can trust you at least to teach her well."

The girl curtsied respectfully and Mistress Radcliffe left the room.

As soon as she had gone the girls sent up a muffled shriek of mocking laughter. One of them, a very pretty girl with cold blue eyes and an arrogant, striking cast of feature, swept

round to curtsy to Margaret. "Dear, sweet Meg, being a Radcliffe you, of course, are perfect . . ."

Margaret Radcliffe giggled. "Mary Howard, you're a ninny. You should not mock my poor old aunt. She is kind and honest, at least."

"And a withered-up spinster, like someone else we know," Mary Howard declared maliciously.

"Are you mad?" Margaret glanced anxiously at the door. "Mary, for God's sake . . . someone may hear you."

"Up here? It would only be someone who had no business to be eavesdropping at our chamber door," Mary Howard said with a shrug. "Someone stupid and idiotic . . . like that old goat, Knollys . . . always peering and snooping around, especially when he thinks we may be getting dressed and he has a chance to see something he shouldn't . . ."

Mall listened, fascinated, as the other girls chimed in with derogatory remarks about Sir William. Clearly she was not the first girl he had pursued with his lustful stares and sly, mock-paternal embraces.

Meg Radcliffe turned to sigh, smilingly, at her. "Take no notice of them. Welcome to court, Mary Fytton. I've met your brothers once or twice."

Mall smiled eagerly. "Ned and Dick?"

Mary Howard said spitefully, "Ned is charming, but Dick . . . well, we all know about Dick Fytton . . ." And she minced across the room, fluttering her lashes. "Anyone who meets Lord Southampton meets Dick Fytton."

Mall felt her face crimson. Was Dick so widely known for what he was? No wonder their father had effectively refused to see him when he called.

Margaret Radcliffe frowned. "Lady Mary Howard is famous for her wicked tongue, Mary. Pay her no heed."

Mary Howard twisted her pale upper lip into a sneer. "Oh, you're so sweet, Meg Radcliffe . . . you make me sick!"

Meg ignored her. "As you'll have gathered, I am Margaret Radcliffe. This is Bess Vernon . . ." She gestured to a short, pretty girl with brown eyes and long, rich brown hair whose face lit with a friendly, shy smile. "This is Elizabeth Russell, and her sister, Ann . . ." Mary curtsied to them and they nodded back. "Bess and Ann are my dearest friends," Meg went on, laughing. "We have been a merry threesome . . . now we shall be four, I hope . . ."

Mall responded eagerly, "I hope we may!" She liked

Meg, and both of the Russell sisters seemed friendly enough. Bess had a square, belligerent face but her eyes were quietly pleasant, and Ann was slightly delicate in feature with gentle, shy dark eyes that smiled readily.

Lady Mary Howard laughed insolently. "Oh, how I hate these female friendships! Give me a man every time!"

"We all know which man, too, don't we, Mary?" Bess Russell said coolly. "It is a fierce cat which makes a play for the tiger's prey."

A dark flush stained Lady Mary's handsome face. "I am not the cat here, Bess Russell! If you breath a word of such a thing I'll scratch your eyes out!"

"I will not need to say anything," Bess shrugged. "A certain person has sharp eyes. When she discovers you are smiling upon Lord Essex she'll cut your claws fast enough."

Lady Mary breathed hard, then turned and whirled out of the room, followed by several of the other girls. Bess and Ann Russell giggled.

"That will teach her to jibe at us," Bess said with calm satisfaction.

Mall was struggling with some perplexity. "I . . . I thought Lord Essex was married," she said tentatively.

The other three exchanged silent glances. "So he is," Bess said flatly. "To poor Frances Sidney, Sir Philip Sidney's widow . . . and how anyone who had been married to such a man could afterwards marry Robin Devereaux I can't imagine. Well, she is paying for it, now, poor Fran. Essex twists her heart. When he is not paying court to the Queen he is chasing Mary Howard, and he does not have to run very hard to catch her, either, for she is very willing to be caught."

"Poor Lady Essex," Mall said, stunned. She thought of the tall, handsome nobleman with the flaming head of hair and could not find it surprising that he should be so fatal to her own sex. That arrogant charm must be well-nigh irresistible.

Meg Radcliffe hugged her. "Oh, I like you, Mary Fytton . . ."

"Call me Mall," she said. "Everyone does."

"A country name," Bess Russell said with a faint trace of hauteur. "Every dairy maid is Mall or Moll. You are at court now."

"I am still Mall," she said stubbornly.

Meg laughed. "And so you shall be! Bess, claws in! Mall is one of us, remember. Keep your sneers for Mary Howard."

"And Lady Kildare," said Ann Russell meaningly.

Bess giggled and Meg blushed. To Mall, Bess Russell said calmly, "You will meet Kildare later. She's greengage-sharp and is at daggers drawn with poor Meg over Lord Cobham . . ."

Mall looked at Meg hesitantly, not sure whether to take this seriously or not.

Meg winked at her. "Oh, I adore sweet Lord Cobham," she said. "He is a trifle too plump but what is a little fatness in a man?"

Mall saw that she need not take Meg's love too seriously. There was much of play-acting in it.

Meg threaded an arm through hers confidentially. "We all fix on someone," she whispered. "One must love! It is the custom of the court. Look about you, Mall, and choose some handsome gentleman to be your own true love, at least in play. We sigh, we adore, we give favours . . ."

"Only in pretence," Ann Russell said quickly, anxiously. "A ribbon or a glove . . ."

"A kerchief or a smile," said Meg lightly, laughing.

"A book or a buckle," said Bess.

All three laughed, and Mall laughed too, after a moment. Then Meg said, sobering, "But we have to be discreet, despite the innocence of it all, or the Queen goes mad with rage, for she still cannot bear to have us flirt."

"She cannot bear any man to look away from her," said Bess in her direct, belligerent fashion.

Meg glanced nervously at the door. "Shh . . ."

"It is true," Bess insisted. "Mall had better know it now. The Queen never forgives anyone for falling in love. Marriage is an insult to her virginity. We must all revolve around her night and day, and woe betide anyone who leaves flattering her to sigh after one of us. Hell hath no fury like it . . ."

"I know!" said Ann suddenly. "Let us fix on someone for Mall. Who shall she love?"

Meg and Bess laughed, taken with the idea. "Who is free?" Bess asked. "Lord Southampton?" And gave a wild gulp of amusement.

Meg frowned at her. "No more of that! How about the Earl of Worcester's son, Henry Herbert? He is not spoken for as yet."

Bess glanced sidelong at Ann with a lift of her dark brows. Ann flushed delicately and said nothing. Bess said glintingly, "I think not, Meg. Why not your brother, Alex?"

Meg stared at her without answering for the space of a second. Mall saw something sombre in her eyes, then she laughed. "Why not, indeed? Mall, I give you full leave to pursue my brother Alex until he cries mercy."

"I would not want to hunt the poor gentleman down like a stag," Mall said, smiling. "Is he handsome?"

"Passable," said Bess Russell drily.

"And charming?"

"How could you doubt it?" Meg teased. "He is a Radcliffe." Her face grew serious. "And the kindest, sweetest soul in the world to me." She broke off, then went on, "He gave me my mare Bay Compton. Do you love to ride? We do. That is one good thing about being at court. We get to ride every day, and the Queen rides hard, believe me. We have to keep up with her or face her wrath, so you must be a good horsewoman, Mall. Have you brought a horse from home?"

Mall nodded. "My own Grey Fytton. She is finely bred and silk-mouthed. I would not trade her for a purse of gold."

"I'll wager you my new gilt buckles that my Rhone Howard is faster than your mare," Bess said quickly.

Mall retorted before she had time to think. "Done!"

"What will you give me when I win, though?" Bess demanded.

Mall bit her lip, thinking. "A pair of Italian scented gloves!"

"Scented not poisoned, I hope," said Bess, grinning.

"Rhone Howard is not the equal of my Bay Dormer," Ann said in a cross voice. "What will you wager me, Mall?"

"Nothing," said Meg firmly. "Bess should not have made a wager in the first place, but since she has it must stand, but Mall, no more wagers, I beg you, or if it gets to the Queen's ears there will be storms. She hates gambling."

"She hates everything pleasant," Bess said, grumblingly. "All she cares for is politics and money . . ."

Somewhere a bell chimed and Meg groaned. "We shall be late for supper! Hurry . . . we must wash our faces and go down . . ."

The Queen ate alone or with a few invited guests, but the serving of her meal was conducted with as much state as though she were present in the great hall where everyone else at court ate. Each dish was brought in by richly clad gentlemen to a blare of trumpets and a ringing of kettledrums. One of

the ladies cut a piece of each dish and the Yeoman of the Guard who held the dish had to taste the morsel, to make sure that no one had poisoned it. This ritual was conducted formally, with great solemnity, and then the Queen's selected portions were carried to her private chamber by her ladies.

Mall had been taught the rituals while she was at Lady Shrewsbury's house, so it was not unfamiliar to her, but the court was so much greater and finer than Lady Shrewsbury's household that the sheer size and magnificence made her mute with nerves.

She was chosen by the Queen to wait on her, and under those icy grey eyes her fingers turned to thumbs and she fumbled and blushed as she moved about behind the Queen's great chair.

The Queen watched her remorselessly, but when at length she rose to leave the chamber she smiled at Mall. "You have done well," she nodded.

Mall was left in a glow of gratitude and adoration. The withered human being encased in a blaze of splendour might not match up to her mythical Queen but there was kindness there, and Mall was eager to respond to any human kindness. Relief made her want to dance for joy. When Meg pressed her arm and winked at her she beamed back, making Meg's eyes dance.

"Now we can eat," Meg whispered, and they all dived on to the food hungrily. The Queen had eaten very little. There was plenty left on the groaning table. Mall was not hungry tonight. She was far too excited. She picked at a little chicken, nibbled some fritters and ate a bowl of custard. Meg passed her some lemon suckets. They sat sucking them while the other Maids of Honour squabbled over a plate of gingerbread topped with caramelised honey.

Mistress Radcliffe clapped her hands irritably and the Maids rose in a rustle of silks to follow her. They found the Queen playing the virginals, a fine instrument of cedar wood inset with gilded wood, the ivory keys running smoothly under her fingers.

Around the chamber lounged a cirle of men, their faces turned to the Queen like petals around a daisy heart. As the Maids entered there was a faint rustle of interest. Some of the gentlemen darted furtive glances across the room before looking back quickly at the Queen. Mall saw her face darken and the grey eyes looked coldly at them as she broke off playing.

"God's blood, is this how I am to be served? You dilly and dally stuffing yourselves at table while I must attend to my own wants?"

The Maids froze, faces pale, staring at her. Mall saw the narrow grew eyes flash round them all under the pale high brows.

Quickly she moved forward to the Queen's side and curtsied deeply, head bent. "How may I serve your Grace?"

There was a long silence. She heard a sharp intake of breath behind her. The Queen was so unpredictable that such boldness might well prove her undoing.

Then the long, thin fingers fastened on her chin and raised her face.

Mall looked up pleadingly. The grey eyes were merciless as they stared into her eyes.

Then suddenly the sharp, cruel lines of the features softened. A smile touched the sunken lips. "Pretty child," she said softly. "That black hair, those black eyes . . . pretty child, Fetch me a cup of wine, child. I am parched."

Mall rose and turned round, suddenly realising she did not know where to find wine. Looking beseechingly at Meg she saw her glance to one side. She followed the look and saw a fine crystal jug of wine and some glasses standing on a table.

In total silence she walked gracefully to the table, poured wine into a glass and went back to the Queen. She proffered it, sinking again into a curtsy. The Queen accepted it with a gracious smile and sipped slowly.

After a pause she smiled again at Mall. "Do you play, child?"

"A little, your Grace," Mall said nervously.

The Queen moved away from the virginals and sat down in her cushioned chair, "Play for us, then."

Terrified, Mall took her place on the stool, biting her lower lip. All memory seemed to have deserted her. She could not recall one note of any music. She laid her fingers on the keys, swallowing. She would make a fool of herself. She would be laughed out of court. Her family would be disgraced. She would be married off to a baker.

Someone moved beside her. A long hand placed some music sheets in front of her blinded eyes. She turned her head slowly like someone in a trace and looked round.

Richard stood beside her, his brown eyes warmly encouraging. She had not even noticed him until now, so intent had she been on the Queen. He smiled at her, nodding.

She looked back at the music and the notes swam at her out of a sort of fog.

Without realising it she began automatically to play. Slowly, as she overcame her nerves, she felt her fingers lose their first stiffness. The music began to flow in her head and out into her long hands.

When she came to the end she lifted her hands from the ivory keys with a dazed smile.

There was a little pause while everyone waited for the Queen to comment. Mall turned her head and rose, curtsying.

"You have a delicate touch," the Queen said, smiling. She clapped her hands warmly and at once the rest of them broke out into generous applause.

Richard bowed. "And will your Grace not now delight us again? No one plays like your Grace. The keys leap to kiss your fingers as you play, as would not we . . ."

The Queen laughed, eyeing him with amusement. "I had not thought your bluff tongue could flatter, Dick . . ."

"Flatter, your Grace? I am a plain blunt seaman. I can only speak my mind openly as an Englishman should, and I have never heard anyone play the virginals so well as your Grace." There was an honesty in his voice which compelled belief. The Queen looked touched and rose.

"Why, then, how can we refuse? I will play one piece and then I shall go play some chess."

While she played Mall found her way back to the ranks of the Maids of Honour. She had a mixed reception. The coterie who followed Lady Mary Howard gave her cold looks and turned scornful shoulders on her. Meg, Bess and Ann grinned triumphantly and winked.

Mall stood with her eyes fixed on the Queen's glittering back as the music filled the low-ceilinged room. Then the Queen stood up and everyone applauded vigorously. The Queen walked over to Mall, smiling. "And what says Mistress Mary?"

"I have come to court to serve Diana," Mall said softly. "But now I see Diana has much to teach Apollo."

The Queen loved such classical allusions, particularly when they compared her to a goddess. She laughed and looked delighted. "You've a witty tongue as well as a pretty face, Mary Fytton," she said.

As she turned away Lady Mary Howard hissed at Mall, "And you have a cunning brain, Mall Fytton! Fawning wretch . . ."

The Queen halted and turned back. Her quick ear had picked up the words. She looked icily at Lady Mary, who went white.

"Snakes hiss, Lady Mary," the Queen said tersely. "Get to the Maids Chamber and let me not see thee again tonight."

Lady Mary walked away with a flounce and a toss of her head. The Queen's voice soared to a furious roar.

"What, you insolent hussy! No curtsy for your Queen? Have a care, mistress. You think too highly of yourself. Howards have gone to the block before."

The court held its breath.

Lady Mary, even whiter now, turned back and made a sullen curtsy.

The Queen glared ar her. "Get to bed," she said between her yellowing teeth. "Get to bed! And be sure it is thine own bed, hearken! I know whose bed you would slip into, harlot! That is the swiftest road to the Tower, be warned!"

Mall shot a quick look at Lord Essex from under her lowered lashes. He was standing erect, as white as his lace ruff, his eyes fixed on the Queen's seething face. Above his face his hair blazed fierily and the flames of it seemed reflected in his eyes.

As Lady Mary scurried away the Queen turned slowly and looked at him.

For a long moment their eyes warred silently. Then the Queen turned away and sat down at the chess board. The courtiers stood waiting to see whom she would summon to play with her. She glanced round them, then crooked a finger towards Robert Cecil. Smiling, he took the stool opposite her.

Meg touched Mall's sleeve and jerked a head towards a remote corner of the long room. Mall followed her and the Russell girls.

"You did very well," Meg said generously. "She likes you."

Mall looked at her miserably. "Lady Mary does not. She thinks me too forward. All I wanted was to please the Queen . . ." Lady Mary was a wealthy heiress. She had no need to please anyone. How could she understand Mall's complex feelings towards the Queen? Mall did not merely see the Queen as the fount of all honour and riches. She had felt a stark loneliness in the old, withered face tonight. Across the room her own loneliness had reached out in response. She had longed to touch a smile into those desolate grey eyes, to

soften the bitter lines around mouth and brow. She knew all about loneliness and the desire for love, and she sensed that the Queen did too.

"You pleased the Queen indeed," said Bess Russell brusquely. "Remember, though, that to please her is sometimes to displease others. Jealous eyes will watch you from now on."

Mall nodded, biting her lip. Ann Russell slid a hand into hers and smiled gently. "Smile. People will be watching you. There are eyes everywhere at court."

Meg nodded. "Never let your guard slip. Someone will be waiting with a dagger if you do . . ."

What was she doing here in this jungle, Mall asked herself despairingly? Behind the smiles and silks lurked savage beasts looking for a chance to kill. Everyone had a surface glitter which dazzled the eyes, yet beneath lurked hatred, envy, jealousy, greed. Her father had brought her into this snake-pit empty-handed. She had to fight for her life without help from anyone, and for what prize? A rich marriage? Favour from the Queen? What did either of these things mean?

All her life she had wanted nothing but to love and to be loved. The prospect of it had shone before her ever since she was able to understand life. Yet like the rainbow it seemed always to recede before her, arched in bright shimmering colours against a dark sky, always promising, always out of reach.

She thought of Richard's kindness as he saw her at a loss to know what to do as she sat down at the virginals. For a moment she had been utterly blank. He had seen, and understood, and saved her. What else was love but this thought, this caring? He had eased her moment of confusion, and she closed her eyes, thinking of him with adoring gratitude. Among the cruel beasts of the court he stood out, a man; honest, strong, to be utterly trusted.

Her heart ached as she forced herself to remember he could never be hers. He was all she could wish for in a lover, and he belonged to another woman, and despite his wife's madness he was still bound to her by all the iron links of God and man.

After that first day at court, time seemed to merge into a long vista of similar days. She went about her duties with the other Maids of Honour: rising at dawn, breaking her fast, walking with the Queen, then given a few hours of freedom

until dinner, and afterwards, riding, hunting, hawking or rowing down river in the royal barge.

The spring brightened. The trees broke into their new green leaves. Wild flowers sprang among the grass and under hedgerows. The sun shone in a chill blue sky.

In April the court moved to Windsor in time for the Garter ceremony on St. George's Day. The great park was full of speckled deer who moved in and out of the shadows like silent ghosts. Conies tunnelled underneath the ancient castle walls, the green turf full of sandy holes where they had dug their burrows, and careless riders caught their horses' hoofs in them if they were not wary.

On fine mornings it was a joy to ride out into the park beneath the wide, wind-moved oaks, watching their branches make dark shadows upon the turf. After the chill castle rooms the air smelt freshly of spring and the sun could be warm upon the back.

Richard had kept his distance since Mall came to court. When one of the noblemen eyed her or smiled, his eyes flattering, she was at times conscious of Richard's silent observation, and her own response would be muted, anxious that he should not think she encouraged flirtation. Dancing in the evenings she would be lifted high in a partner's arms and over the other heads would catch a glimpse of Richard, but if their glances met, as they often seemed to do, he looked away.

At times she wondered if she had imagined that moment in the gallery of his home when he had held her, kissing her so passionately, murmuring fiercely to her. It was the rainbow she pursued in her sleep, evading her eternally, but drawing her on in helpless need. Was he, she wondered jealously, sating his own needs in other arms? She remembered how he had told her once that he turned to harlots when his need was great, and hot colour burnt in her pale cheeks at the thought. She had been told that men had more urgent needs for the relief of the body than women, but her own body seemed to tell her otherwise. If he must seek such relief, she thought bitterly, why not with her? Could he not see she loved him desperately?

The day before St. George's Day dawned fine and bright. The Queen was occupied with matters of state, and the maids went riding in the sunny park, childishly gay in their freedom for the while, galloping through the thickset trees, leaping fallen logs, their faces flushed with exercise.

Mall had seen Richard riding beside a girl in a fine silk gown, her fair hair dressed in pearls, and sick jealousy had eaten into her as she kept her eyes on them, seeing him laugh, his head thrown back, his brown throat bare and muscled in the sunlight. The girl had moved closer, whispering, and Richard's lean thigh had pressed against her as they talked. Mall angrily rode away into the trees alone, fighting with emotions which wrenched at her as if she were in physical pain.

Was it only with harlots that he found pleasure, she wondered bitterly? Riding carelessly, her head bent, tears running down her white face, she barely noticed which way she went, and was surprised to hear hoofbeats behind her suddenly. Glancing over her shoulder she saw Richard's red head beneath the shadowy leaves, and anger made her whip her horse forward, ignoring the shout he gave her.

Too intent on evading him, she did not see the low branch until too late, when it flicked across her palfrey's eyes and maddened it, sending it into a furious canter. At first she merely rejoiced in the sudden speed, then she realised the animal was out of control, and a flicker of fear came into her mind. She was flung to and fro as the palfrey rode faster and faster, her hands clinging for dear life to the high saddle, branches whipping across her face, cutting and slashing at her.

Richard had increased his own speed. He drew level with her, his hard face set in a brown, angry mask. She watched, terrified, as his strong hands wrenched on the bridle, turning the palfrey violently.

Gradually the animal slowed to a walk, shivering and sweating. Mall looked nervously up into Richard's cold, furious face.

"What folly were you at?" he demanded harshly. "You deserve to be whipped like a child for it. You were almost killed, do you realise that?"

Remembering the way he had smiled at the fair-haired girl, she tossed her black head defiantly. "I am sorry you had such trouble, cousin. Get back to your friend, I beg you. I would not delay you for a moment."

There was an odd silence. Then his finger lifted her chin and his brown eyes inspected her flushed face. She tried to look away, realising he could see her tear-stains only too clearly, but he would not let her evade the long, searching look he gave her.

"You stupid little girl," he said strangely. He released her face, slid from his horse and his hands reached up to pull her down to him, their grip around her slender waist compelling.

She almost fell down into his arms, floating as light as summer thistledown, her eyes enormous, her heart beating fiercely.

He lowered his head and took her mouth hotly, his arms around her waist, and Mall trembled, kissing him back, throwing her arms around his neck to pull his head down towards her, all the passion and hunger she felt for him in the way she responded. His hands hardened on her waist, caressing the slight body, and the kiss took on a dream-like quality for her, draining her of all thought, drugging her into an insistent sweetness out of which she offered him wordlessly whatever he cared to take from her.

Violently, he pulled away from her, dark red and shaking. They looked at each other. Mall swayed towards him, her lifted mouth begging for him to take it again, and Richard swore under his breath.

"God, Mall, no . . ." he said hoarsely. "I should not have followed you. I saw you ride in among the trees and I sensed something was wrong. I can feel your every thought, my dearest love." He groaned. "Come, let us go back to the others while we have strength to go."

"I do not want to go," she whispered huskily.

He abruptly lifted her back to her saddle. "We have no choice," he said thickly.

She sat obstinately, her head bent. "I will not go until you give me your promise," she said.

"What promise?" he asked warily, gathering his own reins into his long hands.

She looked at him through her lashes. "Dance with me after the banquet tonight," she said.

He made a sound of despair. "Mall, I cannot . . ."

"We are cousins. Why should we not dance?"

His hand came over her own and gripped it savagely. "How many times do you think I can hold you in my arms and let you escape untouched, Mall? I am not strong enough to withstand the temptation. There! Is that what you want? To hear me admit the truth?" His voice broke in a hoarse sigh. "Do you think I've found it easy to watch you dance in another man's arms, see you smile and flirt, as the other girls do?"

"You have held so aloof from me," she said on a sigh. "Why can we not speak now and then? Even a smile would not hurt you."

He laughed angrily. "Would it not, Mall? If you were not still so innocent you would not say so."

She put her fingers to his face, tracing the hard line of the mouth which had just brought her blazing into life. "Promise to dance with me tonight, Richard? Just once?"

He groaned. "Oh, Jesu . . . if that is what you want . . . yes . . ."

Her heart thudded. She looked at him, her mouth curving into a smile of utter happiness. "Thank you, Richard."

She rode beside him through the trees out into the sunlit park feeling as though her mind were full of sunlight with that promise gleaming before her.

After the banquet in the great hall at Windsor the dancing seemed to Mall to take an eternity to begin, and she looked eagerly among the richly clad gentlemen for Richard's red head, but could see no sign of him.

She was asked to dance at once and could not refuse, her small white hand in a possessive grip by one of the young nobles who thronged the court looking for place and position.

The music filled the hall. The high rafters seemed to ring with it. Mall danced again, and then again, constantly watching for Richard with an increasing sick disappointment. He had decided not to come, she guessed, breaking his promise to her in order to keep faith with his wife. Or had he gone to find a woman he might take without harm? Her face whitened at the thought.

She laughed and talked with the rest of the court, kneeling to speak to the Queen from time to time, her face filled with over-bright smiles, her eyes dark with pain.

Talking to the Earl of Essex and another knot of teasing courtiers she felt a touch on her elbow and turned, a curved dark brow lifting haughtily, to find Richard at her side.

Her heart turned over and the hauteur vanished from her face, her mouth trembling.

"Cousin," he bowed, bending his lean hard body. He wore black silk, as magnificent as any of the other men present, and above it his head shone like flame.

They took their places in the dance, hands linked. The music seemed sweeter, more intense, to Mall than any she had heard in her life. She parted from Richard, moved through

the measures, came back to him again, hungry for the touch of his hand. As they danced their eyes met again and again. She saw her own hunger in his glance and trembled. When the music ended she felt bereft. She had wanted it to go on for eternity.

Richard walked beside her silently as they moved away. "It is so hot," she said, fanning herself with the black lace fan she carried. "I think I will go outside into the privy garden . . ."

Richard seemed to hesitate. She could sense the struggle going on within him, then he capitulated, and followed her without a word.

In the shadowy garden they stood looking up at the pale moon. Clouds drifted past in transparent wreaths. An owl hooted somewhere out in the dark park. From the great hall came the sound of music; flautboys, recorders, drums, a high, rhythmic sweetness which filled the silent night. Laughter and voices accompanied the sound. They were dancing a vigorous Spanish dance, leaping and turning, handfast. The brilliance of a hundred candles made the windows glitter like diamonds.

"You have a gift for saying nothing beautifully," Richard said, seeking her hand.

She had been mesmerised by happiness, feeling the moment to be too sweet for speech. Her fingers were cold. His hand warm. She was afraid to move for fear it would all dissolve. She had dreamt this moment a hundred times. Was this just another dream?

"You are very much in favour with the Queen," he said, stroking the back of her hand with his thumb. "I am very glad. Have you written to tell your family?"

"No," she said huskily.

He looked down at her. "Why not?"

She could only look at him, her heart in her eyes. She hardly knew what he had asked her. She was rapt in her dreams.

He fell silent. His face altered and she heard him begin to breath fast. "Oh, Mall," he said at last, his voice shaking.

Their mouths moved together and the world fell away in a shower of golden fire. She was half fainting, totally absorbed in him, feeling the warmth of his mouth, the hardness of his lean body, the hunger of his moving hands.

Still kissing they sank to the grass, leaning against the thick bole of an oak. Her head fell backward helplessly, and his

mouth moved down over her exposed throat to where her white breasts rose out of her gown.

"Yes, yes," she groaned, her hands stroking his rough head, clenching in the tough, wiry curls, tracing the bony angularity of forehead and cheek, learning the shape and feel of his head as if she had to know and remember it for ever.

He moved away, breathing as if he were drowning, sucking air into his lungs hoarsely. She put out her hand to hold him imploringly, and he bent his head to kiss her wrist. "How tiny your wrists are," he murmured. "There's a little pulse beating here. Your skin is so white and the vein looks like a skein of blue silk . . ."

She clung to him, burying her hot face in his brown neck, and felt him tense. "Mall . . ." he protested thickly.

Her mouth searched blindly for his and found it, parting under it, shivering feverishly in aroused hunger.

"Your mouth tastes of honey," he said. "I hunger for that milk-white body every night. You fill my dreams, Mall. I think I knew when you were a child that I would love you, but I never guessed it would be so much. I thought I knew love when I was a boy, but my need for you is like fire in my blood. I want to take you, Mall." He kissed her savagely, pressing her lips back upon her small teeth, sending the sweet salt taste of her blood to bring its own message of desire. "I want to take you."

"Take me, then," she said, shuddering, her hand curved to the back of his neck, pulling him down towards her.

"I can't," he said thickly. "You are a child and I am married. How could I live with myself afterwards? One day you would come to hate me."

"No," she denied fiercely.

"You think that now, but believe me, Mall, you would. You are a child still. You have a whole life before you. You must marry some clean young man who will be free to love you in honour. I should never have danced with you, never have let you come out here with me. I've avoided being alone with you since you came to court because I was afraid this would happen. I have no right to look at you, let alone touch you."

"I love you," she said desperately. "Richard, I love you."

"You musn't say it, mustn't think it," he groaned.

"But I do!"

"We must go back into the hall," he said thickly, moving to rise.

"Not yet," she said, throwing herself at him, kissing his cheek, his mouth, his neck. "Don't leave me, Richard. I need you so much. If you leave me I'll die . . ."

He held her tightly, stroking her hair, murmuring gently as she burst into violent tears which stung and blinded her.

"Oh, Mall, my dearest, don't cry. I'm not worth it. You should never be sad. You should be happy. If I could I would take you away across the sea to some faraway island where you would be happy for ever. But life isn't like that. Life is never what you want it to be, what you expect it to be. We have to live in this prison of a world. There's no escape for any of us."

"I can't bear it," she whispered, clinging. "Don't say such things. You make me feel desperate."

"Come, Mall," he said, lifting her to her feet. "Dry your eyes. We have to go back."

She held on to him, totally weakened by her love and feeling of betrayal. "If you love me you would not let me go," she said bitterly. "If you really wanted me you would not shame me by refusing me now."

The rainbow shimmered further and further away. Love withdrew to the melancholy sound of the music in the hall and she shivered, exposed to the loneliness of life without him.

"If I want you!" he said on a savage note. "Mall, you do not know how close I came to taking what I want from you. I despise myself. I swore I would not come near you at court because I knew I had no control when I was with you, but tonight I did all I had sworn I would not do, and I know we must never be alone again." His brown eyes stared at her in desperate, angry fever. "Do not ask me to dance with you, or speak with you, Mall. We must be strangers to each other, since I find it impossible to behave to you as I should. In future we must never be alone again."

She heard his words like the drumbeat of an execution.

CHAPTER NINE

SIR ALEXANDER RADCLIFFE resembled his sister in both colouring and shape of feature. Standing together, they might have been twins, and Mall soon saw that there was a powerful bond between them. They seemed able to read each other's minds without a word. In his company Meg came alive, her eyes alight, her face glowing. Her coy smiles when she saw Lord Cobham were pure make-believe. Her love for Alex was the real thing—strong and deep.

Whenever he visited her he brought her gifts; sometimes a small thing, a pair of gloves, a book, a belt. Sometimes a new gown or a jewel. The whole court knew him for a doting brother. It was something of a joke with them.

Mary Howard, as always, put a more sinister construction on the close relationship between brother and sister. Her cold eyes smiling maliciously she would ask Meg, "Tell me, sweet Meg Radcliffe, how is your brother between the sheets? You're selfish, keeping him to yourself. There are others who would willingly enjoy his kisses."

"There are others who yearn for Lord Essex, too," Meg would answer coolly, and Mall marvelled that she could hear such foul suggestions without blushing hotly.

At Windsor they had more time to themselves. The Queen spent much of her time out in the open air, although she walked rather than rode these days, complaining of rheumatism in her hip. She was anxious about the state of the country. There were frequent riots in the city over prices and as the summer wore on there were darker rumours afloat in the kingdom. The Spanish were arming a new Armada, it was said. There were signs of strain in the fabric of the state. Threats both from within and from without daily grew more alarming.

The Queen ordered the Council to act swiftly against the internal threats. Some of the London apprentice boys who had rioted over food prices were arrested, tried and executed.

Mall shuddered at the news. She remembered the dirty, starving faces of the children she had seen, and when she looked around the court and saw London merchants, fatly clothed in rich silks and gold chains, she was sickened by them. Poor boys, she thought. What a terrible end to their lives.

The executions made no visible change in the attitude of the common people, either. Rather, it bred resentment and hatred. Prices continued to rise. The court became the symbol of oppression instead of being the symbol of protection it had once been. When they moved from one palace to another, as they did every six weeks or so, they met with frequent signs of hostility. The Queen herself still seemed to hold the people's affection, but those around her were often booed or stoned as they rode past. Only Lord Essex seemed beloved by the people. When he appeared there would be wild, passionate cheering. The Queen would ride tight-lipped, her long hands clenched on her reins. She bitterly resented his popularity.

In August came news that the Spanish had landed four galleys in Cornwall, burning several villages and the town of Fowey. London became panic-stricken at the news. The streets were overnight deserted. Houses were shuttered and barred. The shops closed. The Council went into a hasty meeting to discuss ways and means of meeting the new threat. Gradually, though, word filtered through that the Spanish had been driven off again, and the City returned to normal business. The autumn came in with heavy rain and constant storms. The harvest for which they had all been waiting was ruined yet again, and as if that were not bad enough, terrible news came in from Ireland, where Lord Tyrone was still in full rebellion. A battle with his forces went very badly. Several of the best English generals were badly wounded and all hope of a peace treaty flew out of the window. It became clear that they could only expect a long, bitter war with the Irish.

The Queen grew more and more morose. She was desperately worried about the harvest, the war in Ireland and the civil discontent at home. Lord Essex's popularity with her people seemed to madden her. She would not speak to him for days, and he, sulky and outraged, withdrew from court for a while to wait at his house in Wanstead for better weather at court.

His friend, Lord Southampton, meanwhile had suddenly fallen head over ears in love with Elizabeth Vernon, and she, swooning with delight at his attentions, began to disappear for hours at a time and was rumoured to be making secret

assignations with him. Lady Mary Howard, as her closest friend, covered up for her if the Queen enquired as to her whereabouts. That autumn Bess Vernon had many a headache and toothache.

"Have it out," the Queen advised her not unsympathetically. "It will ache until doomsday if it stays in your head." She had often suffered from toothache herself and knew what agony it could be.

And Bess Vernon, smiling secretly, would say, "Yes, your Grace," and sidle away.

In November the Queen was sent a book discussing the succession to her throne, written by a Jesuit, and dedicated to Lord Essex. The implications of the book were clear—Essex was hinted at as the best successor, and the court did not have long to wait for her reactions to it. She sent for him one grey Monday, and those standing outside her chamber heard her voice roaring hysterically at him.

When he emerged he was white. He left for Essex House and gave out that he was sick. After a few days the Queen visited him, but only to tell him that she had finally decided to give the post of Solicitor-General to Master Sargeant Fleming.

"You chose ill when you chose to pin your wagon to my star, Francis," Essex told Francis Bacon. "I'll ruin you. She hates me more each day. But I'll do something for you, I swear. I've some land I do not need. Take that."

Protesting his reluctance, Bacon was persuaded to accept the gift, although his common sense told him he was merely binding himself to a dangerous master. The Queen more and more saw Essex as a threat to herself. He had begun to rob her of the thing she valued most—the love of the people. She would never forgive him for it.

Bacon warned Essex to propitiate her, but the younger man was over-confident of his power. He despised the Queen and longed for her death.

November 17th was held each year as a feast day to celebrate the Queen's Accession, and that year the Queen held a tilt at which Essex rode in black armour on a coal-black horse and distinguished himself in the fighting. Meanwhile sermons were preached elsewhere, trumpets sounded, torches lit on church steeples and bonfires blazed on village greens and city streets everywhere. The Tower of London fired cannon in homage as the Queen rode out to the tilt. For a day she seemed to have regained her old place in the hearts

of the people—they cheered her noisily as she rode past them, and Essex, in consequence, regained his place with her for a while. Mall watched sympathetically as the Earl knelt beside her royal chair and the Queen laid her long fingers on his neck and tickled him behind the ear, saying softly, "Sweet Robin, I have missed you . . ."

The Queen seemed in a better temper after that. She rode out more often. She was full of new energy and good humour. Mall was established as one of her favourites, frequently called to play chess or sing to her, and when she went to dine at Kew with the Lord Keeper, Mall was one of the Maids who went with her. The Lord Keeper showered the Queen with valuable presents: a fan with a handle set with diamonds, a nosegay in which she found a pendant of diamonds, a new gown and the spoon, fork and salt cellar which she had used at table, valuable objects of fine agate. Gifts always put the Queen in a good temper. She smiled a great deal as they rode back to the Palace.

Christmas at court was a time of extravagant feasting. Rich gifts were exchanged between the Maids of Honour, and the Queen herself gave each one a little present while receiving herself a positive shower of gifts. Snow made travel impossible. Again the river was frozen over and Mall went down to see the people skating on the ice. She bought hot chestnuts from a stallholder and ate them in her gloved hands while she gazed, enchanted, at the scene. Some ducks flew down the river and landed, skidding, sliding down the ice, on their feathered breasts, leaving frosted, shadowy tracks where they had travelled along, their orange webbed feet padding, flip-flip, flip-flop, along the grey-blue ice. On the far side of the river the fields lay clear and peaceful under pale skies. Bare, black trees and hedges like scrambled wool, all knots and tangles, stood out against the misty blue horizon.

A voice made her jump. She turned, expecting to see one of the other Maids of Honour who had accompanied her and had gone off to buy hot pies from a stall.

But it was the man Shakespeare whom she had met with Lord Southampton long ago. His pale, intelligent eyes smiled at her.

"Mistress Fytton," he said, making a small bow. "All alone? That is not wise. There are too many rogues in London."

"I am with friends," she said, glancing around. She caught sight of the cluster of girls, their rich cloaks billowing in the icy wind, laughing as they ate their pies.

His eyes followed her glance. "Ah, yes. Mistress Vernon . . ."

When he looked back at her there was a slight smile in his eyes.

"You know her?" she asked.

"I've met her with Lord Southampton," he said drily.

"Oh, yes," she said, understanding.

His smile extended. "Yes," he said. "She is a pretty child, sweet and confiding. I hope she does not confide too much. My lord is not known for his generosity towards your sex."

Mall was made anxious by the remark. Although Bess Vernon was more the friend of Lady Mary Howard, she was easy to like, and Mall did not care to think of her in trouble. Bess had been seeing too much of Lord Southampton, her warm, trusting nature making her an easy victim to his charm. If he had seduced her, without intending to marry her, Bess would be ruined. Her proud family would cast her off and what in the world could she do?

"I do not know her well enough to warn her," she said shyly. "Do you think she should be warned?"

He shrugged. "Who can warn those in love? I doubt she would listen, and I am very sure she would not thank you. My lord may mean well by her, for all I know. He has unpredictable moods of kindness. He once gave me a thousand pounds when I had ceased to hope for anything from him."

She stared. "A thousand pounds?" It was a fortune. Why should Lord Southampton give this man a thousand pounds, she wondered, and then remembered hearing talk of the two poems Shakespeare had dedicated to the young Earl. No doubt Southampton had felt he was getting value for his money. The poems were widely read at court and it had enhanced the Earl's reputation to be their dedicatee.

His mobile, sensual mouth twisted wryly. "It came just when I needed it most."

"Were you in debt?" she asked impulsively.

He laughed. "No, thank God. No, I needed it for a business venture. I invested it in a theatre."

Her eyes widened. "Do you own your own theatre?"

His eyes danced. "I am not rich enough for that. No, I am a mere stock-holder. I own a share in a theatre, my company's theatre." He glanced down at her. "Do you go to the play often?"

"Only when the players come to court," she said.

"Then I shall hope to see you at court some day," he said, glancing around as the other Maids came hurrying towards them across the snowy bank. He gave her a little bow and moved away just as the others reached them.

Bess Vernon stared after him, her mouth turned down. "That's Shakespeare. I did not know you knew him, Mall." Her eyes were unfriendly as she glanced at Mall.

"I've met him once before," Mall said.

"With Lord Southampton?" Bess looked sulky as she asked the question.

"With my brother," Mall said discreetly, sensing that she trod on delicate ground.

Bess stared at his departing back without saying anything else. She was looking, Mall decided, rather pale. Turning back towards Mall her brown eyes stabbed at her.

"Your brother is shameless. I would be ashamed to own him if he were a relative of mine."

Mall flinched. She thought of Dick's passionate adoration for young Southampton. He had loved the boy as fiercely as Bess probably did now. Was that so wrong? If Dick's passion had been mere perversion, perhaps it would have been wrong, but she knew her brother better. All the love of which he had been capable had been spent on Lord Southampton, spilled out at his careless feet in a golden shower.

Without answering she turned away. Bess was distraught. She had anxieties of her own about Lord Southampton. Mall would not make her suffering worse by arguing with her.

The thaw came some weeks later, followed by a gentle spring. The Queen was in an irritable mood. Bad news seemed to come thick and fast and she sometimes seemed almost maddened by her inability to stem the swelling tide of discontent in the kingdom. She even quarrelled with Lord Burleigh who went off to sulk at his own house with her insults ringing in his ears.

"We'll make a progress to pass the Lenten time," the Queen announced, staring out of the window of her bedchamber at the bright blue, wind-blown sky. She appeared to grow restless as each spring morning dawned. In her earlier years she had spent much of the year in progress around her kingdom, but lately she had not felt capable of making the effort, and her popularity seemed to wane with her absence

from the roads of the kingdom. The people could not love a Queen they never saw.

They had been at Richmond for some weeks. The Palace had grown stale and stank, as always after the court had been in residence anywhere for some time.

There were so many people at court that they very soon made even the largest palace uninhabitable. The privies grew rank. The rushes were filled with vermin and stale food. The local food supplies were eaten up. The rooms became airless from the sheer press of bodies.

Every few weeks, therefore, the whole court moved on to another palace. Richmond, Windsor, Greenwich, Whitehall, or the beautiful palace of Nonsuch—one by one in a continual round they moved from place to place, devouring and consuming as they went. The servants were kept busy cleaning and restoring behind them. London alone, of all the kingdom, had a chance to see the Queen continually as she moved across the city back and forth from palace to palace, riding along the roads, or, more often these days, gliding up and down the Thames in her royal barge.

In the past year more and more of the counties had begun to refuse to pay the Ship Money required to pay for the upkeep of the Navy. With trouble threatening on all sides this sullen refusal infuriated the Queen, who ordered the Council to be ruthless in its pursuit of those who did not pay. Her rage increased in March 1596 when news came that Sir John Hawkins had been killed in a battle with the Spaniards.

"Fool though he was, he was an Englishman," she raved, tears in her eyes. She was always deeply disturbed when someone she knew intimately died, as though each death were a threat to her, and indeed she seemed to age at each death, as though their lives cut short a thread of her own.

On the heels of this bad news came worse. The town of Calais was besieged by the Spaniards, who were at war with France, and the Queen promised to send Lord Essex with an army to raise the siege, but no sooner was Essex at Dover to gather his forces than the Queen embarked upon her usual custom of delaying and changing her mind from day to day. First she ordered a fresh levy of six thousand men to be raised to join Essex at Dover, then she cancelled the order saying that they would never reach Calais in time. The French begged her to send the troops, so she altered her order once more, telling the city to find a thousand men and armour by

noon. She made Essex Lieutenant-General, but hedged him about with so many prohibitions that he was scarcely master of his army. He was ordered to take only such nobles as the Queen approved, and particularly ordered not to take his friends Southampton, Mountjoy and Derby. Essex seethed and sulked and went about busily making his plans while saying gloomily that the Queen was tying his hands behind his back before he started.

From Dover the batteries at Calais could be clearly heard. The blue sky was thick with puffs of smoke and the air filled with the deafening thunder of the guns. Essex finally embarked his troops, but as he and his officers sat down to supper on his ship *The Rainbow* news came that Calais had fallen. Essex wept with rage. Had the Queen not delayed so long, they might have raised the siege.

The troops were dismissed and drifted back to their own counties, relieved no doubt not to have been into battle.

The Queen, meanwhile, was in a furious temper because the Bishop of St. David had preached before her at Richmond on the subject of the mystical numbers, adding a long prayer in her name to God, in which he pointed out that the Queen, being now in her sixty-third year, was in a dangerous year for her. The sixty-third year was, he said, the Grand Climacterical Year, and the Queen's enemies must hope that it would be fatal to her.

"Lord," he went on as though he were the Queen speaking, "I have put my foot in the door of that age wherein men begin to carry a calendar in their bones, all the powers of the body daily decay, so direct me that I may have wisdom with my grey hairs and undefiled life in mine old age . . ."

At this point the Queen opened the window of the closet from which she always heard the sermon and said angrily, "Keep your arithmetic for yourself. I see the greatest clerks are not the wisest men!" Then she flounced away, grinding her teeth, and the Lord Keeper ordered the Bishop to be put under house arrest.

"Silly old fool," Lady Mary Howard said a few days later. "He should know when to hold his tongue."

The Queen turned on her savagely. "And so should you, mistress! The Bishop is a good old man." Her eyes sparked dangerously at Mary's sidelong scornful smile. Turning to the Lord Keeper she said, "Release the good old man from his captivity. He will have learnt his lesson." Then she picked up

an inscribed jewel and offered it to Lord Worcester, saying, "What does this say, my lord?" Lord Worcester peered at it vaguely.

"I cannot read the words, your Grace. My eyes are not good enough."

The Queen smiled triumphantly and read the words aloud. "There! Does that look like the blind eyes of an old woman?"

"No, indeed, your Grace," they all chorused dutifully.

"No, for I am not so decayed as the Bishop imagines. I thank God I have my strong stomach and my wits, my voice for singing and my skill on the virginals, all intact at my age."

"Yes, indeed, your Grace," the sheep bleated.

Mall watched the Queen's hawklike countenance as she turned away and saw a hidden despair in the grey eyes. Age had terrors for the Queen which she could not face. Around her the court seethed with corruption and intrigue. Noblemen given charge of the money for the Navy or the levied troops were commonly suspected of embezzling it. The corruption ran down all levels of society. While the lords pocketed the money for paying troops, the officers in charge of recruiting men would take bribes to discharge an unwilling but well-to-do yeoman and let a poor man take his place. The food laid in for the ships was half-rotten because the victuallers were corrupt. The men were rarely paid. Their clothes, armour and weapons were often poor or insufficient. The ships leaked. The ropes were of low quality. The ammunition was of the cheapest sort and often misfired.

A darkness was coming down on England as the Queen aged. The corruption at the core of the kingdom was spreading out across the country. Rebellious, bitter, hungry, her subjects blamed all their ills on the court, while her courtiers conspired among themselves and watched her like vultures watching a sick lion.

A few days later came news that Sir Francis Drake, too, was dead, and, worse, that the Spaniards were preparing a great fleet against England.

During these weeks Mall saw nothing of Richard Leveson, for he was, of course, at Dover with his father-in-law, the Lord Admiral, supervising the embarkation of the troops in the royal ships. Mall missed him deeply, although they never saw each other alone. It gave her great pleasure to see him, even briefly, across the chamber, or to dance in the same set

in the evenings after supper while the Queen danced with Lord Essex or, dancing with some other nobleman, watched Essex jealously if he danced with someone else, particularly if he danced, as he often did, with Lady Mary Howard.

Mall was still in great favour with the Queen, and, being a favourite, had many enemies among the other Maids of Honour. Since Lady Mary Howard was one of her enemies, Lord Essex was not slow in assuming hostility toward her and his scarcely veiled dislike made the Queen kinder still. At court one must be of one camp or the other. If Lord Essex favoured you, the Queen would not. Although she clearly loved him with a wild, unreasonable jealousy, she was suspicious and wary of him, sensing his pride, his arrogance, his ambition, and she saw his friends as pawns in the deadly game of chess they played. He would endeavour to advance one of them, knowing it to be useful to have friends in high places, and she, as determined, would block the advance, refuse the place. The more she denied his friends any advancement, the more Essex pressed her. The more he pressed her the more the Queen denied him. It was a vicious circle.

Essex might have grown twice as rich, been far more favoured, had he been content to let the Queen love him as she loved the lap dogs she sometimes petted on her knee. That the old woman passionately loved the handsome, virile young man was in no doubt. Her eyes would glow hungrily as she watched him. Her stark nature, austere and controlled, was yet capable of a deeply sensual feeling, and Mall could see that Lord Essex aroused a physical passion in the Queen. When they were briefly reconciled he would sit at her feet and she could scarcely keep her hands from touching him, fondling his auburn curls, stroking his long neck, fingering his features with tactile pleasure. At times, late in the evening after supper, her inhibitions weakened by wine, she would even kiss him on the mouth, or dance with him in a languid, amorous fashion.

Once Mall saw the Earl distastefully wipe his mouth after one long kiss, his expression askew with disgust. Following him along the corridors at Windsor on the way to bed she heard him say to Southampton, "If she would only not kiss me! Her teeth stink and her breath is rank. Old flesh . . . God! How I hate what I am forced to do!"

Mall had been both angry and, reluctantly, sympathetic. Angry, because she had grown very fond of the Queen and

was deeply sorry for her loneliness and isolation. Sympathetic, because she was often forced to go through the same charade with Sir William Knollys, who pursued her with more and more vigour, promising her marriage if his old wife would only die. Submitting reluctantly, when cornered, to a kiss she would feel sick, and she was angry because her fellow Maids, seeing her pliant with Sir William, assumed her to be willing to encourage him. She could not tell them of her father's command. She dared not anger Knollys for her father's sake. When she could she avoided him, but at times she could not escape, and she hated the touch, the sight, the smell of him.

Richard returned briefly to court in May and she saw him in the garden at Whitehall. The other Maids were playing a favourite trick upon a young man who had lately arrived at court—there was a hidden water conduit beside the sundial in the garden there, and it was the custom to lure a newcomer to the sundial and turn the water on, drenching them. Mall sat on a bench, laughing as her friends laid their trap. She heard Richard's laughter echo hers and looked up.

He sat down beside her, stretching out his long legs with a sigh. "I'm weary, Mall. We sail for Cadiz in a matter of weeks and there's so much to do. I have to visit Margaret before I go. If I never return . . ." He shrugged. "She does not know me. I don't know why I go. But go I must."

Jealously she said, "You still love her."

His brown eyes met hers fiercely. "It is not so simple. I am her husband. I loved her for a long time but she is remote from me now. For the sake of our youth, though, I must see her."

She stared across the garden. The roses were coming into bloom, their tight red and white buds dewed among their close-set green leaves. Frustration burned in her throat like acid. She longed to be alone with him in a bedchamber where they might forget the world and let their passion free like the golden sun rolling across the noon sky, burning and fierce and sweet. Her body seemed on fire. She ached for contact with him. Her hand groped towards his and their fingers entwined, hidden in her full skirts.

Hoarsely he whispered, "Do you think I find it easy to leave you? I'd take you now if I dared, on the ground, while they all screamed and ran away. I would risk death and disembowelment to have you once . . . what I would not risk is your ruin. I love you, sweet fool. I cannot destroy what I love."

"I think I'll go mad," she said thickly. "Richard, I cannot bear this. I feel as though I was breaking into little bits. I ache for you . . ."

"Pray God I'm killed at Cadiz," he said heavily.

"No!"

"Sweet love, it would be best for both of us." He stood up, forcing her fingers away. "I should not have sought you out, but I had to say goodbye before I went."

Tears sprang into her eyes. "Goodbye," she whispered. "God go with you, Richard . . ."

"Yes?" He turned and stood, looking down at her, his eyes brooding with desire.

"Take no risks, I beg you. Do not throw your life away."

He smiled wryly. "Oh, I'm a most devout coward, my dear. I'll not seek out death."

His reputation said otherwise, but she did not argue. Watching him painfully as he strode away, tall and lithe, dressed in his customary plain seaman's dress, she prayed that he would not find the death he had gone to seek. She could bear anything but that. Even years of frustration and despair.

With his going, court life grew daily more oppressive. Sir William pursued her so closely that she was in pure terror of meeting him on the stairs or in a corridor. When news came that the fleet had sailed for Cadiz to fight the Spanish she felt a terrible coldness at her heart. The Queen, having bid Lord Essex goodbye too, was equally anxious and brooding. Mall spent hours sitting with her, soothing her and playing the virginals while the Queen stared blankly at nothing.

The fleet having left England unprotected there was much activity around the coasts, making sure that should the Spanish come while the ships were on the high seas, they should not have an easy landing. Bands of soldiers were trained. Bonfires littered the cliffs. The farmers were ordered to be ready to withdraw their animals inland should the Spanish land in order to starve them out before they could establish themselves. Any Spanish prisoners kept in England were suddenly thrown into more secure jails and foreigners of every sort were watched and suspected. Fear and dismay filled the country. The absence of the Navy made the people feel suddenly exposed and unprotected.

Essex had long begged the Queen to make his friend Sir Thomas Bodley her principal secretary, but now that he was

absent Cecil's voice grew in power, and she suddenly made Cecil Principal Secretary. Mall could imagine how Essex would view this decision. Far away at sea, bound to fight the Queen's enemies, he would feel she had stabbed him in the back in his absence.

The panic filling the people spilled over into a hatred of all foreigners. The blackamoors who had in recent years been imported into the country from voyages to the Indies were ordered to be deported at once since they were becoming deeply unpopular. Anyone not clearly English was attacked in the streets.

July dawned hot and sultry. Mall found it hard to sleep. She lay, twisting between her sheets, driven mad by dreams of Richard. Consumed with hungers she did not know how to control, she began to live on her nerves, hardly touching her food, easily moved to tears or hysterical laughter. Daily she expected news of his death. Time moved so slowly she could hear the tick of the clocks, as though each tiny tinkling sound were a nail driven into her hot flesh.

In mid-July came news that sent the bells ringing, the people shouting for joy, the Queen weeping with relief.

Essex had met the Spanish fleet in Cadiz bay and won a great victory. They took eighteen galleys, sank four and burnt five others. The town surrendered. The sky was lit with the reflected flames of a great fire which burnt all night across the grey water, warning Spain that the English still had teeth and would bite.

"Thank God," Mall said faintly, as she heard that Richard was alive and well, although he had fought like a lion throughout the battle.

The joy of the news was somewhat overshadowed by a fresh outbreak of plague in London. The court withdrew as far as possible from the contagion. Once Cadiz had lost its spell, new gossip engrossed them all. A great witch-hunt had begun in Derbyshire and a preacher called John Darrell grew famous by "curing" the bewitched victim, a boy called Thomas Darling. The details of the case were sold to the people in a broadsheet and London buzzed with the story. The Queen, a woman of great common sense, grimaced as she read it. "Silly credulous fools . . . an old country gossip no doubt, weak in the head and despised for her grey hair."

"They will believe any mischief so be it is foolish enough," Robert Cecil said drily.

The Queen nodded. "God save me from their folly." She glanced across the small chamber at Mall, who was playing the virginals with a set white face. "That child does not look well."

Cecil gave Mall a quick look. "I have noted she was pale before. And yesterday she laughed more than was seemly at something Bess Vernon said. She seemed to me hysterical." Cecil's quick eyes saw everything.

"She has the 'mothers', perhaps," the Queen said. The "mothers" was a term used colloquially to describe hysteria or mental disturbance in young women, perhaps because the condition sometimes came on after childbed, when it sometimes led to death. The Queen frowned. "I'll send her to my physicians. I would not want the child to fall seriously ill in my care."

"She is a sensible child, I've found," Cecil nodded. Since Essex disliked Mall, Cecil had taken her under his wing. "No doubt that strain of court life has tired her." He made the Queen a little bow. "We are not all equal to the pace your Grace sets, I fear. We lack your strength of mind and body."

The Queen smiled at him, flattered. "Perhaps a few weeks in the country at her home would do her good. I'll send her back to Gawsworth."

After seeing the royal physicians Mall was pronounced to be suffering from a weakness in the blood, a term which covered any disorder, and prescribed a rest at home.

Mall was dismayed at the prospect and begged the Queen to keep her at court.

"I am not ill, your Grace. I do not want to leave you."

The Queen smiled graciously at her. She liked to hear her servants express such feelings. "We will send for you as soon as you are yourself again. Please me, Mall, by obeying me . . ."

And so she journeyed back to Gawsworth in the heat of summer, jogging along the dry, dusty roads with a heart like lead and a head filled with burning fantasies of a man who was far away across the Spanish seas. Images of him beset her like the flies which bothered her horse and she shook her head with the same irritable frustration in an attempt to drive such pictures away.

CHAPTER TEN

IT WAS LIKE returning to another world, another time. Gawsworth slept under a hot blue sky, the wheat spreading around the house in a golden ocean, the heavy-uddered cows treading ponderously along their accustomed paths to be milked before returning to the flat green pastures, the household waking to the crow of a red-combed cock rather than the ringing of a bell. Her father welcomed her anxiously, disturbed by the letter which had preceded her, bearing the Queen's own signature. The Queen had written a brief postscript, urging him to help Mall back to health so that she might return as soon as possible to those who loved her. Although delighted by such evidence of Mall's favour, Sir Edward was not sure what to expect, and when she stepped down into his waiting arms his eyes were worried even as he smiled and kissed her.

"They say you have been ill," he said, scanning her face. "What sort of ailment was it?"

She tried to smile. The journey had been exhausting physically, even had she not been driven by ghosts. "Court life is not easy, father. I was tired."

Her heavy-lidded, dark-circled eyes spoke for her. He hesitated, however. "And that was all? No other cause."

"It was enough," she said, in flaring irritation, then swayed and would have fallen had he not held her. "Oh, Father, let me get to bed and sleep. I could sleep for a hundred years, I think."

"Not so long, I hope," he said, trying to sound cheerful. "The Queen wants you back with her as soon as you are well enough."

Mall smiled gratefully. "She is very good to me."

His face relaxed. "You are a good girl, Mall." Looking down at her small, white face his eyes grew soft. Even in her weariness she had a cool, untouchable beauty which lifted his heart. How often, he thought, the runt of the litter becomes a

prize animal? Then laughed at himself for the comparison. He was spending too much time on the farm, he thought. In these hard days the land grew more and more important. He had not time now to spare for the pursuit of advancement for himself. All his desire had gone into seeing his children rise, and Mall was the last one who might fulfil his ambitions.

Her mother came into the hall to greet her coolly. They touched cheeks briefly. Lady Fytton's eyes flickered over her, seeing the telltale signs of exhaustion in her face.

"Your chamber is ready. I'll have your maid bring up some hot broth, then you may sleep as long as you wish."

Mall was grateful for the calm common sense of that. There might be no love between them, but her mother could be depended upon to deal with these situations capably. At the moment she wanted only to escape into unconsciousness. Even her father's warm affection impinged upon her aching spirit. Her mother's quiet indifferent sense was what she needed now.

Between cool, freshly laundered linen sheets which smelt of lavender she lay staring at the bedcurtains, listening to the country sounds beyond the window.

Her mind was still obsessed, driven by thoughts of Richard, tossed like a frail barque on the restless sea of imagination. She tried to push everything out of her mind. Sleep. She needed sleep now.

Without even knowing it she fell slowly into a deep, dreamless slumber, and woke to a bright, fresh dawn and the lowing of cattle wending their way out of the dairy. She lay, a hand beneath her sleep-flushed cheek, listening contentedly. During the night her mind had rid itself of troublesome fancies. She was light and unencumbered this morning.

She broke her fast with the family around the great oak table, listening as she ate home-baked wheaten bread and drank home-brewed ale to family talk of babies, marriages and deaths. She had culled some news from letters during the past year, but many small items were necessarily new to her.

Anna had added another daughter, Penelope, to her little family. Sir Edward sighed as he spoke of the baby. "Another girl! Well, at the least, she is fertile and may have many babes yet. Perhaps we shall have a grandson from her yet. They are both young and strong."

"And Aldford? How does the manor thrive?" Mall asked, anxious to hear more news of Anna and Ned.

Sir Edward looked satisfied. "Ned is a good farmer. His yields are high. He'll make a passable master at Gawsworth in his time."

"Please God not for many years," Mall said quickly.

Her father laughed. "I have no intention of dying yet awhile, child. Ned will have to wait for his inheritance."

"I am glad they are doing well," she said thoughtfully. "Ned was very worried while I was there last, and he takes it out on Anna when he is unhappy."

Lady Fytton looked up from her silent contemplation of her sparse repast. Her cold eyes were angry. "Does that Welsh girl complain of my son?"

"She loves him," Mall said quickly. "But I saw with my own eyes how Ned treated her."

"Ned was a fool to marry her," Lady Fytton said starkly, two spots of dark red in her cheeks.

"Well," said Sir Edward awkwardly, aware of the chill which had fallen on the air. "Let's not spoil Mall's first day home with talk like this. Does Nan write to you, Mall?"

Mall's eyes lit up with affection. "Oh, often," she said with soft pleasure. "I wish I were as good a correspondent, but I hate writing letters, and the Queen leaves me little time to myself. Nan's letters have made me so happy."

"There is no sign of a child yet," Sir Edward said on a sigh. "I had hoped . . . but, then, it is early days yet. Early days. She seems happy enough at Arbury, though. She writes very cheerfully to us." He glanced at his wife. "To your mother. They exchange letters all the time, do you not, love?"

Lady Fytton's mouth relaxed faintly. She nodded. "All the time."

Mall felt a pang of envy for the ease of that relationship. She could imagine their letters well enough. Calm, cheerful strings of phrases which left out so much and yet had everything needed.

There were no fevered heights or depths in such love. Only the warm, sunny usage of old habit. And she envied it passionately. She had never been able to touch such a state of being. Outwardly calm and serene, she was inwardly as volatile as a spring day: one moment all sunshine, the next in the midst of storm.

"Can I help you today, Mother?" she asked Lady Fytton, as they rose from table.

"I shall be working in the stillroom," Lady Fytton said stiffly. "It is too close in there for you. I think you should walk for a while. You need fresh air and exercise."

She wandered out across the garden, pausing to sniff the rose-scented air, watching a cloud of white butterflies hovering above the cabbage patch in the vegetable garden, smiling as the doves tumbled with feathered sweeps down into their dovecot. A gardener lifted an untroubled face to smile at her as he weeded among the herbs. The heat of the summer sun drew out the mingled odours of mint, tansy, camomile, sage, valerian, betony and the heavy scent of lavender. So many fragrances mingled together as she walked round the four sides of the house, she seemed to float on perfumed air. The strongest was the overpowering fragrance of the carnations and pinks, although some wallflowers still remained from spring, pouring their heady scent across the garden as the sun soaked their petals.

She loved to see the stone walls between the garden areas made gay by yellow, russet and deepest purple red wallflowers. Their colours, as well as their perfume, had always been a delight to her, although, like all her family, she somehow loved the pansy best—that flower the symbol of her house and therefore most dear to them.

Sir Edward and Lady Fytton loved their garden. They enjoyed a stroll in it before supper on a summer evening, and made sure that the flower beds were richly sowed with all varieties of flowers. Towering sunflowers, candytuft, marigolds, love-in-a-mist, all the country favourites like sweet-william, hollyhock, columbine, primroses and snapdragons; the Fyttons liked to see them all growing together in sweet profusion.

When the sun had climbed to its height she glanced back at the house, realising it was time for dinner. As a child she had been regulated to the meal times of the house by her mother's heavy hand if she was late. Now her stomach prompted her and she walked back to eat a generous meal, which made her so sleepy that she returned to her chamber and lay down on her bed, a proceeding which was unusual enough to half alarm her. Her mother had never permitted such weakness before.

She woke when a maid shook her and, grinning, asked if she wanted any supper. "For they've all but just sat down and will eat."

Mall splashed her hot face with cool water from the basin on her bedroom table, dabbed her skin with a rough towel and went down to sup.

The next day she went farther afield, venturing past the park into the fields. The dry, sweet scent of grain, the flaring brightness of the poppies which blew between the yellow stalks, the luxuriant green of the hedgerows, the steadfast oaks and dreaming elms, were woven into a spell under which she was able to recapture her childhood. Her starved senses caught fleeting memories with each familiar sight, sound, smell. She had not until now realised how much she cherished the memories of childhood. Now, after her absence at court, she felt as if she were coming back to a long-forgotten past, finding it had held more happiness than she had imagined.

The unwanted one in a family, lost and isolated, she had thought herself to have grown up totally without love or warmth. Now she realised that she had formed her own ties with the world around her without knowing it. Like someone on a journey who reaches a peak and looks back to find the difficult terrain he has traversed was in fact far more varied and pleasant than he had thought, she reached back into the past and made contact with joys she had forgotten she ever felt.

She realised that she had one love which neither time nor pain could alter—her passion for the land itself, for Gawsworth. She rediscovered beauty as she walked, finding a poignant sweetness in the rough kiss of long grass against her hand, the tiny jewelled strawberries hidden beneath hedges, the wild flowers springing valiantly from barren soil.

A hazel copse lay close to the church. The close-set young trees were full of birds. Among the shadows within the copse a handful of craftsmen worked, as they always did, throughout the year. Here they cut hazel canes to make baskets and chairs, wove them into wicker fences for the fields and gardens, cut them for hop poles and bean poles. The little copse provided work for a number of villagers and shelter for birds and small animals. The trees were always filled with bird song and the flutter of wings. Squirrels and rabbits, moles and mice made their homes here. A shadowy, sun-filtered sanctuary, it had a cheerful look to it.

Today she paused to talk to old Hob, his gnarled hands deftly splicing a cane with a small, sharp knife.

"They say you have been in London with the Queen," he mumbled between his dry old lips. "That must be fine and rare."

"Fine and rare," she smiled agreement.

"But do she know how ill things go with us in Cheshire with bread so dear we cannot feed our bellies and the levies always marching through to Chester bound for Ireland? We are for ever moithered with deserters running away from the colours and they are bad, dangerous men, for the most part. Would slit your throat for a penny, though unwilling to risk their own throats for the Queen. Does she think of that, eh?"

Mall thought of the Queen's weary, lined face and a sigh broke from her lips. "The Queen thinks of all her people," she said with sincerity. "We are at war with half the world, it seems. She hates war but what can she do?"

"Ah," said old Hob, stacking his canes rapidly. "They say Lord Essex is a brave young man. Some do say he'll be our King when t'old Queen dies."

Mall's nerves jumped. "That's treason," she said.

"Treason?" Old Hob chewed his lower lip. "Maybe t'is, but t'is what folk say. He be an Englishman. Better he than that Scottish king or some other damned foreigner."

Mall left him and walked on, irritated that he should have dragged her back into the nightmarish, complex and tortuous world of the court, after she had taken so long to escape it.

The harvesters were just beginning to bring in their crops. The heavy-eared corn was full and fat. She paused to watch the men advancing across the fields with steady purpose, their scythes swishing, their faces grimed with the dust. From time to time they would pause to swig from fat-bellied stone jugs of ale lying in the hedges, or munch bread and cheese. The black crows sat, cawing, among the trees, watching for field mice. A magpie flew, black and white in a flash, landing on the stubble with an ungainly waddle.

Mall turned away and wandered back to the house. Her head ached from the sun. Her hem was white with summer dust and stained with grass.

The days slowly passed in a haze of purposeless content. Her mother made no claims upon her time, leaving her free to wander during daylight hours, coming home at even with the flushed face of one who has been out all day, sometimes with armfuls of wild flowers to fill the house: pink storksbill, wood sorrell, marsh mallow, St. John's wort, stitchwort,

white campion, ragged robin and a dozen others. They died far more quickly than garden flowers, yet they had a delicate beauty which garden flowers lacked. She stuffed them into vases and they gave the rooms a sweet fragrance for a while. Her mother said nothing, watching.

Daily Richard's image lost its potency. She felt herself grow away from him. Love had brought nothing but pain, fever, aching frustration. She wanted no more of it.

Meg Radcliffe wrote to her from court once or twice, long chatty letters about how things stood there, filled with gossip and speculation.

Mall read bits of them out loud to her parents. Sir Edward was amused by Meg's wicked tongue.

"She's a forward lass," he said, laughing at one piece of news Meg retailed.

Essex had returned from Cadiz as the hero of England, welcomed back to London by cheering crowds as he rode in, bearded and lame after an injury received in Spain. His injury cleared soon enough, but his rapturous reception had done him no good with the Queen.

"The Queen frowns on him while the people smile," Meg wrote. "Which favour is the more important he must judge."

Essex's judgement had never been his strongest suit. He felt able to shrug at the old Queen's jealousy, particularly as his chief enemy, Walter Raleigh, had sulkily retired to his own home at Sherborne Castle because the Queen had not proved generous enough to him. With Raleigh out of his path, Essex felt himself invulnerable, barely bothering to notice the small, dark smiling figure of Robert Cecil in his path.

Cecil's own ambitions never rose as high as the crown itself. Enough for him, as for his father, old Burleigh, to rule England through the Queen and serve his country and himself in so doing. Because he made no attempt to court popularity with the mob Essex supposed him to be a toothless dog. He was to find increasingly that he was wrong.

Mall had intended to return to court at the summer's end, but somehow the weather turned against her, and she was forced to stay at Gawsworth through the winter.

Christmas came and went, with all the old customs preserved, and the house was filled with the scent of oranges and the freshness of winter greenery: holly and ivy appeared on the walls, balls of pearl-white mistletoe hung in strange places. The mummers stamped into the hall, snow on their boots, to

go through their ritual play and receive generous gifts from the head of the house. The Fyttons and their servants sang around the huge log fire. Sweet, strange carols filled with the brooding mystery of Christmastide drifted up to the rafters. "I sing of a maiden who is matchless, King of kings to her son she chose . . ." They sang high and sweet with firelit, smiling faces, their stomachs full with Christmas food, their eyes lit with the candles of contentment.

In January snow turned to driving, sleety rain and the ditches overflowed, flooding the fields, drowning cattle and sheep and even men. A four-year-old boy was drowned playing by the brook and his mother was seen about the village with red eyes for weeks afterwards.

Meg's letters came again when the roads were cleared. Much had happened at court. Robert Cecil's wife had died and Southampton had quarrelled with my lord Northampton. A duel nearly followed, but the Queen intervened, ordering them to make friends. The Queen was making desperate efforts to raise a new loan for the coming year, and to economise on expenditure was urging everyone to cut down on their feasting, particularly during Lent, when it was in any case forbidden to eat flesh. Because of the great influx of people into London the Queen was trying to halt the spread of enclosures—too many noblemen were enclosing common land, driving the people away from the country, destroying whole villages at one stroke.

Far too often these enclosed plots of land were turned into sheep runs. The loss of so much agricultural land was believed to be partly responsible for the enormous rise in prices of wheat and hay, and enclosing land was violently unpopular with everyone except the noblemen and landowners who benefited from it.

In mid-March Mall heard from Meg that Cecil was more and more the Queen's confidante, spending hours with her each day, while Essex sulked in his chamber, claiming, as he usually did when he felt threatened, to be sick. Raleigh, returning to court, had made a strange sudden peace with Essex, perhaps because of a marriage between the two families. Having grown closer to Essex, Raleigh had then made it his business to bring the Earl closer to Robert Cecil. It was time, he said openly, for the two chief men of the kingdom to come together. Essex, alarmed by the Queen's continuing coldness towards him, was ready to agree to anything, and

the Queen was relieved to see peace returned to the court.

When she had read this letter aloud to her parents, Sir Edward said with a frown, "It is time you returned to the court, Mall. You are looked for there. The Queen sends messages to bid you to come back. Your friends miss you. Why do you not go soon? Of course, we shall miss you here, but you owe your duty to the Queen now, not to us."

Mall sighed. She knew he was right but she did not want to go. Life had proved far less complicated here at Gawsworth. Like the survivor of a bloody battle, she had no wish to go back into the thick of the fight again.

Lady Fytton helped her pack. Mall spent one last day in the garden and picked a Gawsworth violet to take back with her, pressed in her Common Prayer Book. Standing in the hall while the wagon waited outside, she kissed her father and then turned quickly, eyes pricked with tears, to her mother. Lady Fytton looked at her steadily. They touched cheeks, their bodies stiffly averted. Even though they had not quarrelled during the past six months, they had not overcome their bedrock hostility towards each other. Mall knew they never would.

"Write to us more often," her mother said coolly. "Your father likes to hear your news."

"I will try," she said, smiling at her father. He stood there, square and ruddy-faced, as rooted on his own soil as one of his great oaks. She loved him deeply and hated to say goodbye to him.

Then she was riding away through the spring landscape, seeing the gay yellow of Gawsworth daffodils fade behind her, with all of England before her.

She arrived at court as April dawned and was made very welcome by the Queen, who smiled and gave her hand to kiss, looking at her very kindly.

"Now I shall be willingly and graciously served again," she said, with a meaning glance around the great room at Whitehall.

Later, as she sat with Meg Radcliffe in the Coffer Chamber where they all slept at court, she asked with a grin, "I gather something has happened while I was away? Trouble with Mary Howard again?"

Meg's eyes danced. "Not this time. Howard is as jealous as the Queen."

Mall's glance widened in speculation. "Essex is chasing

someone else, you mean? That man is a very Turk. Is he insatiable? How many more of us will he pursue?"

"God knows," said Meg.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. Who is it now?"

"Bridges," Meg said, gleeful.

"Bridges?" Mall's brows rose. Elizabeth Bridges, the richest heiress at court, was the grand-daughter of Sir William Knollys's old wife, the former Lady Chandos. Elizabeth, a spoilt, extravagant minx of a girl had no scruples and very little heart. Although so wealthy the girl had been kept short of money by a parsimonious father and had been pursued by fortune-hunters since an early age. She borrowed money constantly, never paid it back and was usually embroiled in schemes to borrow more. Mall disliked her, but the Russell girls were often to be seen with her.

"What does he see in Bridges?" she asked aloud.

"Her fortune," Meg shrugged cynically.

"But he can never come at that. His wife still lives, I suppose? Or does he mean to dispose of her as his stepfather disposed of his wife by pushing her down stairs?"

"Hush," cried Meg, horrified. "Have you forgotten walls have ears here?"

Mall groaned. "I've been away too long, I think!"

"I think so, too," Meg said, smiling at her. "Far too long. I missed you. So did Alex."

"Sweet Alex," sighed Mall affectedly. Her supposed passion for Alex Radcliffe had been an amusement which covered her real love for Richard all last year. Now she thought seriously about turning the game into reality. Alex was a wealthy young man, handsome, pleasant and friendly. She could do worse.

Suddenly she caught the downward flick of Meg's thick lashes and a strange, uncertain quiver passing over her face. She was puzzled. Was Meg angry because she had chosen Alex as her mock lover?

Meg turned back to her, smiling, all warmth again. "You must hear all about Bridges and Essex first . . ."

Essex, it seemed, had been playing Balloon in one of the covered courts adjoining the palace. The large inflated leather ball flew back and forward between the players. Lord Essex began to play much harder when he suddenly noticed Elizabeth Bridges and Bess Russell sitting among the onlookers.

"You know what a goose Bess is," said Meg lovingly. "It

was easy for Bridges to persuade poor Bess to go with her, even though it meant stealing away from attendance on Her Grace. Of course, the Queen noticed their absence and some sweet soul told her where they were . . .''

''Mary Howard,'' guessed Mall.

''Who else? She was green with jealousy all this while and saw her chance to put Bridges into disfavour. Mall, the scene! Her Grace shrieked like a fishwife and spat and slapped poor Bridges . . . then she expelled them from the Coffer Chamber, forbade them to sleep at court, turned them out of doors like gypsies to seek their own shelter. Poor Bess was white with terror. I'd swear she saw herself begging in the streets for bread. Of course, Lady Stafford took them in and there they stayed for three days until her Grace relented and took them back.''

''And Essex?'' asked Mall.

Meg's glance was sly. ''What do you think? The Queen raked his face with her fingernails in her rage. I thought she would be sure to have a stroke. He stalked out and she screamed after him to come back, but he kept going.''

''And went to bed pretending to be ill?'' guessed Mall.

''Of course. She comes round in time and he keeps away until she does.'' Lowering her voice to a thready whisper she added, ''Mall, if I were the Queen I would be ashamed to let the whole world see me reduced to such a condition by a man less than half my age . . .''

''She loves him,'' Mall said pityingly.

''And hates him,'' said Meg.

''That too,'' Mall agreed. ''He is a sweet poison to her. She does not know which way to turn. Poor lady.''

Once more Mall settled into court ways, taking her turn to serve the Queen at table, or play to her, or sing to her, or walk with her. At times as they walked through the knot gardens at Whitehall the Queen would talk of Lord Essex, almost as though Mall were someone else. Once or twice at night, as she helped the Queen to bed, she suspected the Queen's memory to be slipping backward into a happier time. Once the Queen called her Kate and smiled lovingly as she did so. ''Do you remember, Kate, my old Ashley?'' she said as Mall drew the sheets up to her chin.

Mall learnt to ignore these lapses, smoothing over awkward moments when a name slid away from the Queen's troubled mind. Once the Queen began to talk of Lord Essex's stepfa-

ther, Lord Leicester, who had died in the year of the Great Armada.

Her thin greying hair loose on the pillows she stared at the flickering yellow candle flame with fixed cat's eyes. "Ah, he was a man. My Robin Good Fellow . . . sweet Robin, and for all he strayed, with one or other fancy, I knew him to be true to me. He would not have treated me so. Had I married him we might have borne sons for England." Her pale face wavered like paper under water. "Or I might have died. Marriage is for others. I told him so. How could I marry? Alive I was a Queen. Married to him I should have been a woman and his wife. Wives have died before now. My father's wives died. Robin's wife died. No natural deaths, any of them. The block or falling down a flight of stairs . . . violence is bred of marriage." She plaited her long white fingers restlessly. "Yet never to have lain in his bed, never died under him . . . either way I lost. Robin, Robin, why did I refuse you?"

Mall stood silently, terrified by being made an unwilling confidante to all this pain and grief, not daring to move yet not daring to speak.

The Queen's withered lids sank down, her pale lips mumbled like those of an old hag munching bread. A froth of spittle flecked her mouth. She snored faintly. Holding her breath, Mall tiptoed to the door and breathed a sigh of relief to be outside in safety.

The incident gave her a fresh insight into the Queen's feelings towards Lord Essex. Mall suspected now that the Queen saw more of his stepfather in him than anyone had realised. Leicester dead was Leicester forgotten to everyone at court except the three people most intimately involved—the Queen, Lord Essex and Lord Essex's mother, Lettice Knollys, the Queen's cousin and deadly enemy from girlhood, the woman who had married the Earl of Leicester partly in order to cause the Queen pain. It must have seemed fair enough to Lettice—after all, the Queen had something Lettice desired but could never have—that glittering golden circlet which set her apart from the rest of mankind, her sovereignty. It must be hard for the royal kin to see the crown on a cousin's brow. And so Lettice had deliberately, with malice, taken the Queen's lover and married him, knowing that Elizabeth was powerless to stop them.

The smothered sexual yearnings towards Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, which the Queen had repressed for years

must have been reborn when she first saw his lithe, auburn-haired stepson striding through her court. Essex bore in his arrogant, fair-skinned face all the Plantagenet characteristics which the Tudor most admired. His physical beauty went hand-in-hand with courage and generosity of spirit. Perhaps the Queen had seen him as the son she might have had if she had married Leicester. When had she first begun to confuse her feelings towards him? The custom of the young men at court was to worship the Queen as a goddess whose favour they passionately desired. They wrote poems to her in which they called her Diana, Venus, Gloriana. From that remote pedestal she must often have yearned to step down to enjoy the pleasures they found with flesh and blood women. Now in old age, faced with the truth that she could never now know what it was to surrender to a man, her affection for Essex had grown twisted and complex. She loved him for his wit, charm, manly beauty, for the sake of his stepfather, for his own sake too. She hated him for his youth, because hers had vanished. She hated him for his popularity because all she had ever had was the love of the English people and she jealously clung to that now in old age. She hated him because she could never enjoy his body.

Love and hate had become so closely entwined they could never be unravelled.

Essex had learnt how to treat the Queen from watching Leicester's way with her. Leicester, too, had cajoled, sulked, withdrawn to his country home to brood and pretend sickness. Each time the Queen, desperately in love with him, had been broken by the threat to his health. If it had worked for Leicester, Essex must think, why not for him? Elizabeth was enough of a woman to be protective in illness even towards old men like Lord Burleigh. So far Essex's tricks had always won the day. Love was stronger, it seemed, than hate. But for how much longer?

That summer Alex Radcliffe invited Mall to accompany his sister on a private visit to their country home. The Queen reluctantly gave her permission, adding in an acid tone that she wondered that Mall should wish to leave court again so soon after her visit home.

"Only for a few days, your Grace," Mall said humbly. The bond between herself and the Queen had been strengthened by what she had learnt of the Queen's feelings.

She felt a fellowship between them. They had both had

lonely, neglected childhoods and they had both been frustrated in love. Mall's deep yearning for her mother's affection was in some strange way alleviated by the Queen's obvious preference for her company.

With a quick, shrewd look the Queen smiled, patting her cheek. "Well, so be it, but come back to us soon. We like to have your smiling face near us."

Lifting her head with a bright, adoring smile Mall kissed the thin, white hand held out to her. "Thank you, your Grace," she said gratefully.

The journey was a pleasant one. The roads were busy but in good repair because it was summer, and it was a joy to have Meg's company on the road.

The little house party were chaperoned by a sleepy matron with two chief interests: food and slumber. While they danced to the lilt of a mandoline, or sang madrigals, giggling at their mistakes, she snored softly, her head sunk on her chest. Her sleep was so deep that they were able to steal from their rooms at dawn and go riding in the misty forest without her ever discovering their absence.

"Aunt Patty is the perfect guest," Alex said wickedly. "She sees and hears nothing. We could hold orgies and she would never notice."

"Oh, an orgy!" Meg said, eyes twinkling. "Do let us have an orgy, Alex. I could not bear to go through my life without one . . ."

"The Queen would not like it," Mall said, tongue in cheek.

"We shall not invite her," Alex said solemnly.

Meg shrieked with laughter.

"Old Knollys would," Alex said teasingly. "He would jump at the offer of an orgy." His bright eyes danced sideways at Mall. "Especially with Mistress Mall . . . every time he looks at you his head is filled with erotic fancies."

She shivered. "Don't!"

Meg linked arms with her protectively. "Alex! Mall cannot help it if that old goat follows her everywhere."

"She could tell him to leave her alone," Alex suggested drily.

Mall's brow was troubled. "My father is his best friend. He told me to be very pleasant to Sir William. If I offend him, my father may suffer."

"Yes, she is right," Meg said quickly. "Knollys is a

spiteful man. He would make trouble for her family if she offended him."

"I try to keep out of his way. What else can I do?" Mall looked at Alex directly. "I hate him. But I am afraid of him."

"I see your problem," Alex said slowly. "The answer is to marry someone else—and soon."

She blushed. "No one has asked me, sir," she said, looking down.

Alex glanced at Meg who met his glance, then turned away and wandered down a shadowy alley of yews. High above the old house a crow called mockingly. "Caw caw . . ." There was a little silence. Mall looked up through her thick black lashes and saw a faint smile on Alex's lips, a wry enigmatic look on his handsome face.

Feeling suddenly foolish she hurried after Meg and they went in to sup in the long, oak-walled hall while a boy played the lute in the minstrel's gallery high above them and the candles flickered in the draughts from the door.

After supper, when Aunt Patty had trailed her way, yawning, to her bedchamber, Mall followed her at once, pausing on the landing to look back for Meg. In the shadows of the hall she saw brother and sister standing together, talking in low voices. A few words drifted up to her.

"Why not, Alex? She is a sweet girl."

He shrugged. "I'm not a marrying man."

"You should marry," Meg said.

Alex laughed. Meg looked up quickly at him. He bent to kiss her on her mouth, his lips brushing gently against hers. His hands took hold of her shoulders. Mall saw, as the wind blew the candle flame and the light shifted to illumine them, his knuckles whiten as he gripped Meg's slender bones. Her eyes widened in sudden surmise.

Softly she stole away to her bedchamber. Undressing rapidly she climbed between the sheets and lay staring at the candle-lit window.

Her mind ran back over the last two years. Meg had made much public noise about her passion for plump, pompous Lord Cobham. Her duel with Lady Kildare for his affections was notorious, yet it had often seemed to Mall that Meg in fact found him boring. The satisfied swagger Cobham assumed in her presence brought forth her wicked tongue. She could be acid about him when she chose. It had often puzzled Mall

that Meg should choose so ludicrous an object for her affections when the court was thronged with eligible bachelors.

Could it be possible that Alex and Meg . . . She shuddered and turned over in her bed, closing her eyes with determination against so monstrous an idea.

The idea however, once rooted, took no time to grow. Next day they had a picnic in the park under the trees, eating cold food off pewter platters while the midges swarmed in their hair. Driving away a wasp from Meg's face, Alex paused to pop a cherry into her open mouth then kissed her quickly before returning to his place. Mall, through her lashes, saw Meg's flushed face, noted the trembling of her small hands as she picked up a chicken leg.

Later that evening they danced in the hall, taking turns to stand up with Alex. Mall watched him lift Meg high above his head, her small waist completely circled by his strong, possessive hands. Their faces in the candlelight gleamed with a strange light which made Mall's heart beat faster.

That night she went to bed early again, pausing once more to glance down into the hall. Meg rose from her chair and moved towards the stairs. Alex said something indistinct. Meg seemed to run away from him. He leapt to catch her hand and pulled her round to face him. As he bent forward she leaned her head away to the side to avoid his kiss. Alex buried his face in the side of her neck, kissing her throat. Suddenly Meg gave a strange, fierce groan, turning her head. Their lips met with an angry, explosive motion. She threw her arms around his neck and their bodies merged into one dark outline.

Mall's heart was beating so fast she could scarcely breathe. She moved silently into her chamber and sank down on the bed, staring at her candle. After a long while she heard muffled footsteps. Meg's voice whispered "Good night." Alex said something she did not catch. Meg said breathlessly, "No!"

Half shocked, half envious, Mall wondered how Meg could bear to be the object of a passion so impossible to satisfy. Was it all on Alex's side, though? It was obvious now how Alex felt about Meg. His well-known adoration of his sister had half prepared Mall's mind for what she saw. Had they already been lovers? Was Meg lying awake now, gnawed by the rats of passion and fear, consumed by desires she dared not satisfy? Or was Meg horrified by Alex's passion for her?

She could be fond of her brother and tormented by an inability to end the relationship despite a feeling of distaste for him.

Love, it seemed, wore many masks, some of them unacceptable. Looking back over her life she counted the number of insights time had given her into the numerous patterns of love. Was she depraved that she did not feel utter loathing when she came across un-natural love? Should she hate and despise her brother, Dick, for his feelings towards another man? Or hate Alex for his love for his sister? Or the ageing Queen for her twisted passion for a young man who could have been her son?

Love was like a mirror troubled by changing reflections, never still, never fixed. Love was the broken surface of a lake, wind-fretted, restless. Love was the great, steadfast oaks which stood against every winter wind. Love was the violet beneath the grass. It ran deep and quiet, surged tumultuously, whispered or was silent.

Who was she to try to define or contain it in a single channel?

Next morning she went into Meg's chamber to find her sitting on the edge of her bed while Alex knelt to fit her slippers on her bare feet. They did not notice Mall. Alex bent his head to kiss Meg's tiny naked foot before he placed the second slipper on it. Meg's fingers lightly touched his hair in an involuntary caress.

Had he slept with her? Mall wondered, withdrawing to her own chamber before they saw her.

Alex was growing careless or reckless. Aunt Patty was blind to everything and Mall's discretion had convinced them that she noticed nothing. When they played cards Alex chose to be paid in kisses, saying that Meg had no money in her purse. As he leant over her his hands moved intimately over Meg's breasts. Mall, bent over the table, pretending to count the coins lying there, heard Meg's swift excited intake of breath.

How long, Mall wondered anxiously, before even Aunt Patty's unobservant brain noticed such unchecked intimacies?

"Oh, it's so close in the house tonight," Alex said thickly, moving away. He looked at Aunt Patty, snoring in her corner. "She won't wake up for hours. Let's go for a walk in the garden . . ."

They fetched light wraps and went out. The flowers breathed a thick, sensuous perfume all around them. The night was

dark, starless, heavy with cloud. The lit windows of the house behind them were the only illumination.

"Hide and seek," Alex said hastily. "We will play hide and seek. Mall, stay here and count to two hundred and we'll hide . . ."

Meg opened her mouth to protest, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

"Count slowly," Alex said as they ran away into the dark. "Give us plenty of time to hide . . ."

When their rustling footsteps had died away Mall counted slowly and when she reached two hundred moved away on tiptoe. She searched the garden but they were not visible. She hesitated at the orchard gate. Surely they would not be in there? Then she heard a faint sound from far away among the close-set apple trees. She crept across the damp grass, shivering.

Her body froze into immobility as she heard Meg burst out into short, quick cries. Mall had never heard such a sound before but instinct told her what it meant.

Before she could turn away, embarrassed and disturbed, Alex groaned, "Ssh . . . you'll be heard . . . dearest . . ."

Then Mall heard his breathing quicken and quicken until his voice broke into splintered fragments compounded of agony and pleasure, sobbing Meg's name.

Mall's heart stopped briefly. The night seemed empty, chill with premonition. What were they doing? What had they done? Now that her fears and suspicions were made certain she felt terror seep along her veins. She moved back slowly but nervousness had made her clumsy. She tripped over a log and fell with a crash.

She heard nothing for a few seconds. Her head was going round. Then she saw Meg's face through the darkness. Meg looked as white as a ghost. The wide, glimmering eyes were filled with fear.

"I fell over something," Mall said weakly. "I thought you might be in here . . ."

Behind Meg she heard a furtive rustling. Alex getting dressed? Meg was watching her closely. Mall scrambled to her feet, brushing down her dress, searching for something to say.

"I'm cold," she said at last. "Meg, can we go in now?"

Meg looked at her outstretched hand, visibly hesitating. Then she took it in her own icy little fingers. They went back into the house. Nothing was said. Mall asked nothing. Meg

told her nothing. Between them lay an immeasurable distance.

Next morning they returned to court. Six weeks later Alex was sent on a mission to France. Mall was relieved to see him go. Her friendship with Meg had altered slightly in the intervening period. They still saw a great deal of each other, but Meg seemed afraid to be alone with her, as if she dreaded what Mall might ask.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

RETURNING TO COURT. Mall found that Richard had returned, his face tanned a dark bronze by the wind and sun, his body thinner than ever after the rigours of a sea voyage. In his black silks, walking beside his father-in-law arm in arm, he was laughing when she heard his voice, talking casually, and her body seemed to tense in expectation of pain at the sound. Walking past him in the long gallery, her black head coolly held high, she deliberately did not glance at him, but in every nerve she felt his brief glance at her, and pulses began to beat at wrist, neck and temple.

Out of sight in an empty alcove she leaned her hot face upon the window, breathing shallowly to avoid the pain of feeling. She had not expected the sight of him would cause such pain. Her months at Gawsworth fighting against her love seemed powerless against one second in his company. He might have spoken, she thought bitterly. After so long an absence he might have bowed, or stopped her to make some pleasant greeting.

During the dancing that night she was more gay than usual, her eyes provocative as she smiled at her partners, permanently conscious of Richard's watching presence in the great room. She did not need to look for him to know where he stood. Her heart told her where he was at every second, as though every pore in her body had eyes which could see him.

Among the other girls she swayed, slender and dazzling, her black head and eyes drawing attention to the pure white of her gown. Her laughter and wit brought her into the centre of the group around the Queen, and faces applauded her as she and the Queen talked, tossing words like light dandelion clocks from one to the other, roars of amusement following them.

She danced again, moving lightly and seductively around her smiling partner, her body graceful in the stiff silk gown.

Turning, spinning, she flowed around the room, an excitement like fire running through her veins, aware of just one pair of brown eyes which watched her, fighting a need to meet them. She wanted desperately to know what he was thinking, what he was feeling. All her brilliant display was for his eyes, as though she were one of the peacocks the Queen kept on her terrace, spreading light and colour to catch the eye of her mate.

Laughing at one man, she let her glance wander, as if casually, towards where he was standing, and felt anger harden in her body as she found him smiling at Lady Mary Howard, his red head bent to speak to her. His eyes lifted briefly and she felt them flash towards her too fast for her to look away, and for a second passion flowed between them, a passion so sharp it cut her like a knife.

She looked away, swallowing. Her gaiety vanished like a bubble. She was sick, sick with longing, sick with desire, sick with grief.

She walked dumbly into a patch of shadows between the glare of the candles and stood as if staring admiringly at a tapestry which she barely saw through pain-blind eyes.

She felt him behind her before she heard or saw him. His voice came softly. "You are brighter than the candles, Mall."

She did not look round or move, tensing to still the hunger in her body.

"How are you, Richard?"

"Well," he said. "I need not ask how you are. I have been watching you all evening."

"Have you?" She was relieved her voice sounded so light. "I did not see you."

There was a little silence. She half turned, heart beating, and found him closer than she had expected, his shoulder touching hers. For a second she swayed as though she would faint, her face turning white.

She could hear him breathing erratically. He tried to smile, his mouth wry. "Sweet liar," he said huskily.

"Oh, Richard," she groaned, her eyes closing, forgetting where they were for a moment.

He drew a harsh breath. She felt him straighten away from her. He took her hand, bowed over it, touching it with his mouth, so that to a casual observer it would seem the usual customary salute, but against her ice-cold skin his mouth burnt hungrily before he released it and slowly moved away.

That night she cried into her pillow, aching in mind and body, wondering if pain had no end. She had looked for love so blindly all her life and when she found it, it brought her more bitterness and agony than ever her mother's hatred had.

That summer Mall visited the play from time to time with her brother, Dick, to listen to the shouted words, laugh at the coarse wit and applaud fine verse, discussing for hours what they had heard. When the court moved to Windsor she still managed to find time to visit him occasionally, but in July Ben Johnson, a swaggering braggart of a man, wrote a comedy whose cruel wit pricked the London aldermen. Enraged, they demanded of the council that all theatres be closed, and the Council, agreeing with their fear of civil discontent, not only closed them but ordered them to be demolished.

Listening in Dick's rooms to players gloomily discussing their future Mall noted Shakespeare staring into the ashy fire with a frown.

"What will you do, Will?" asked one player.

"We go on tour," he said. "Starting at Dover, then down west. It will be sweet to breathe clean country air after the stench of town."

"Do you think they will relent?" Dick asked him.

His blue eyes moved sideways in contemplation of Mall, a curiously ironic smile on his red mouth. "Ask your sister. She knows them better than we do, these fine gentlemen."

Mall flushed at something in his look. "The Council blame the riots and the plague on you," she said.

"And pox and whoring." Shakespeare sighed drily. "And gambling and robbery. The flux too, I've no doubt. All the evils and sins of the world are laid on our shoulders. Thus are they clean of them, those fastidious gentlemen at court."

A sudden, swarthy player from the Rose said acidly, "Well, you've a rich patron, Will. Why don't we all find a pretty young nobleman to milk, boys? A man may turn a sweet penny if he beds with a he-goat."

Dick's chair crashed as he lunged at the man, his face suffused with scarlet. The swarthy player's hand suddenly held a dagger. Shakespeare moved quickly. The weapon clattered to the floor as he struck the man's arm, and he kicked it into a corner. "Throw him out," he said contemptuously.

The others carried the man, struggling, from the room.

Mall listened anxiously to the angry cries she heard as they went downstairs.

She became suddenly aware of silence in the room. The slow sifting of ash in the grate was audible against it. She looked round and found Shakespeare staring at her, his blue eyes hot.

"You do not speak to me when we pass at court," he said bitterly.

She flushed. "If I am attending Her Grace I may not leave her to speak to anyone."

"You speak to old Knollys, though," he said.

"Sir William governs the household. Of course I speak with him."

"Does he govern you, Mall?" he asked in that odd voice. "They say you sleep with him."

"That is a lie!" she said furiously.

"Is it? He makes his desires plain enough," he said, his mouth sour.

"What business is it of yours?" she demanded. She knew the gossip well enough, but he had no right to speak of such things.

The sensual mouth parted. "Perhaps I envy the old man," he said thickly. "Who would not wish to suck the honey of your lips?"

She moved backward as he came closer, coming up short against the wall. He leaned against her body, his chest and thighs pressing on her hard.

The blue eyes held her glance. Looking into them made her confused. She forgot who he was for a moment, thinking of Richard's loving brown glance. The room was over-warm. She had taken too much wine with her dinner and her head swam. A dizzy languour crept over her. She knew he was going to kiss her and she no longer cared.

"Sweet Mall," he whispered. His face came closer. The blue eyes burned into hers, sending her into a trance of sensual longing. She thought only of Richard, and her eyes closed, helpless with love for him. Excitement made her lips bloom with sudden life. As his mouth touched hers, her lips parted feverishly. His tongue forced itself into her mouth. Richard's kisses and touches had taught her passion. Now the lessons flowered in her body as she let Shakespeare kiss her, her body arched towards him, desperately needing the passion

he was offering her. She forgot who he was, she was drowning in sensual need, her hands touching him.

Dick's footsteps hurried up the stairs. They sprang apart. "Write to my rooms tomorrow," he whispered to her, his eyes desperate. "I go on tour in three days." He hurriedly gave her an address in Bishopsgate. "Mall, make it soon. I am sick with longing for you." His face was dark with passion and his eyes ate her as he spoke.

He left at once and Mall returned to court, her mind consumed with erotic fantasies. The night she overheard Meg and Alex in the orchard she had come to a full realisation of what passion meant. Her love for Richard was consuming her. She was tormented by physical hungers he would not satisfy, and her body left her no rest that night.

Ever since she came to court she had been conscious of the hot love affairs the court pursued. Sex and ambition were the over-riding pleasures around her. Sometimes both were sought at once, as Mistress Vernon did with Southampton. But often the lovers were both married and sought only brief pleasure. The very air of the court was heady with sexual excitement. Pursuit and capture were practised on every side. Even she, innocent though she still was, had been affected by it. Men constantly pursued her, and distasteful though she found old Knollys's advances, by permitting intimacies out of fear of him she had been corrupted. If he might kiss and fondle her with her father's good will, her mind demanded, why should not Shakespeare?

She groaned, turning on to her face, as Richard's name rose to her lips. That way lay madness. He had proved unyielding. He would not take her. He had brought her frustration, misery, fevered yearning. She would not even think of him.

But Shakespeare . . . the very idea of sleeping with him made her wince. For a moment his passion had awakened her, but she pushed the memory aside, sickened by her own weakness. If she could not have love with passion, she would go without either. She wanted no part of the sexual lust the player had offered her.

The three days passed. She kept close to the Queen until she had heard Shakespeare's company had left London.

The fleet was preparing for a journey to the Isles of the Azores, but when it set sail it ran into bad weather and had to return again.

Raleigh and Essex were united for once, with Lord Howard in command, but quarrels over precedence broke out, as they always did when Essex was present. He must be first in every company.

Lord Howard sent Richard back from Plymouth with angry letters to the Queen complaining of Essex. Mall was in attendance when he came into the Privy Chamber, and while the Queen angrily read the letters she walked away to look out of the window, with Richard following her closely.

They stared out in silence. She leaned her hands on the stone sill, trembling at his nearness, and suddenly his long hand covered one of hers.

She jumped and looked at him, taken aback. He so rarely spoke to her that his touch was astounding.

"You do not look well," he said huskily.

She smiled bitterly. "Oh, I am very well, thank you, cousin."

His eyes lingered on her mouth, making it quiver helplessly, as if his look were a kiss.

"Don't waste your sweetness," Richard said in heavy tones. "Mall, find a man who is free to love you. For God's sake, take someone soon or I will run clean mad."

The Queen called to him and he turned to stride back to her. Mall stared out of the window, struggling with anguish. He wanted her to love another man. She was merely embarrassing him by her blatant love. Her body ached with torment, hearing him speaking to the Queen, his voice so dear, so familiar, so remote from her.

In October Shakespeare's company returned from their tour. The playhouses were to open again at last. Dick told Mall that Shakespeare had played at the Herbert house, Great Wilton, near Salisbury, during the tour. The Earl of Pembroke's wife had been Philip Sidney's sister, very fond of poetry and plays herself, and had enjoyed having the players visit Wilton. Her sixteen-year-old son, William, a young man carefully educated to take his place as next Earl, had taken Shakespeare's eye, Dick grinned.

"Lady Pembroke got Will to write some sonnets for the boy to persuade him to marry," she was told. "They tried to marry him off last year but he would have none of it. Well, why should he tie himself down so soon? But Will wrote the sonnets and was paid well for them."

"So now he has a lady patroness?" asked Mall drily.

Dick grinned. "Will says the boy is beautiful."

Mall felt her face burn as the words sank in and averted her face. It was a chill autumn evening. The wind from the river blew coldly through the ill-fitting windows of Dick's room.

Dick was smiling to himself. "Will says the boy is like a green hazel wand, slender and cold, with strange eyes and a face as lovely as a girl." He sighed. "It seems he comes to London next year. I've seen the sonnets. Will surpassed himself with them. But if I were the boy they would make me more in love with Will than the idea of marriage."

"Maybe that was Shakespeare's intention," Mall said coldly.

Dick laughed. "I would not be surprised."

Towards the end of October Richard Leveson's father-in-law, the Lord Admiral, was created Earl of Nottingham in gratitude for his years of loyal service to England, and on the following day the Queen opened Parliament. Soon afterwards came news that Essex had landed in Plymouth again, having missed the Spanish treasure fleet but captured some merchant ships. Southampton had sunk a Spanish man-of-war and proved himself a good captain. The Queen was pleased with the news of success and sent Essex money to pay for fresh supplies and men so that he might go to sea again. Her pleasure turned to rage when she later learnt that Essex had quarrelled with Raleigh during the voyage.

Essex hurried up to London. The truce between himself and Cecil was fragile. Cecil was angry with him for his arrogance on the voyage, and especially for his overbearing treatment of Raleigh, who was, as Cecil pointed out, a far more experienced commander than Lord Essex. The Queen, taking Raleigh's side infuriated Lord Essex who fell back on his old trick and withdrew into solitary brooding.

Although he had a duty to attend the Parliament meetings he put in no appearance there, either, to the discomfit of his friends and the amusement of his enemies. He gave out that he was sick, but he was not believed. He had played wolf too often in the past.

As the festivities of Christmas approached Essex came out of his shell and appeared again at court, only to fly into a new rage over Lord Howard's earldom when he realised that the new Earl of Nottingham took precedence of himself. He made so much fuss that the Queen was drawn into the quarrel. When he again withdrew to his house at Chelsea, she missed him and grew fretful with Cecil, whom she blamed for the

new quarrel. While Essex was absent the Queen would not call the Council together and so nothing could be done. Cecil was frantic over the waste of time. There was much business to be discussed but without a meeting of the Council it all remained unresolved. The court talked of nothing else.

Over Christmas the Queen pleaded with Essex, but he would not be moved, and in the new year she surrendered, her love stronger still than hate, and created him Earl Marshal of England, thus giving him precedence once more over the Earl of Nottingham, who was drily ironic about the whole situation.

"When I was a boy I played at leap frog," he said to the Queen in front of Essex. "But I gave up playing boys' games long ago."

Essex clapped a hand to his sword angrily, but the Queen begged him not to quarrel with "my good old man", and having won his point Essex could afford to ignore Nottingham's sarcasm.

Parliament was being almost as difficult as Essex. There was a great deal of open discontent among the Commons. They were sick of heavy taxes, sick of wars, sick of monopolies of trade being owned by the great noblemen of court. The Queen heard daily reports of their mood and grew more and more anxious.

Late in January 1598 Southampton quarrelled with one of the Queen's gentlemen in waiting because he ordered Southampton and Raleigh to stop playing a noisy game of Primero in the Presence Chamber after the Queen had gone to bed. Their noise was keeping her awake.

Southampton, in a flaming temper, had struck the man violently. The Queen was angry with him and he, feeling himself slighted, said he would leave court for ever. He did leave, at the Queen's command, and Cecil persuaded the Queen to give him permission to go abroad for a tour of Europe for pleasure. Poor Elizabeth Vernon wept most bitterly and was several times absent from the Maids room at night.

"She is a fool," Mary Howard said bitterly. "He will leave her with a swollen belly."

"She swears he will marry her," Bess Russell said with some sympathy.

Mary Howard's eyes mocked her savagely. "Oh, men are full of such sweet oaths and break them in the next breath. He'll sail away to France and forget her."

The City was full of country gentlemen come up to attend Parliament. The inns and taverns were filled to bursting. "The whore houses do a roaring trade," Dick told Mall as they sat eating roast apples by the fire in his room. "These country bumpkins are feasting on rich London flesh while they may."

A rapping at the door disturbed them half an hour later. Mall had drawn her skirts back to warm her frozen feet and legs. At the interruption she threw her skirts back and sat demurely, hands in lap. Dick opened the door and gave a cry of pleasure. "Why, Will. Is it you, old friend? Come in . . . there's no one here but my sister . . ."

She rose and turned, face flushed not only by the fire.

His eyes flew to her face, savagely demanding. "Mistress Mall," he said in a quiet voice which made her heart beat fast. He bowed, taking her hand and kissing it.

"I'll go down and get a jug of ale," Dick said, snatching up the empty pewter jug which stood on the table. "I'll be but a moment, Will. We must drink to a merry meeting."

When the door had closed, Shakespeare turned back to her. She hurriedly sat down on her stool by the fire and looked into the flames.

"You never wrote," he said, his voice low.

"I could not."

"Why not?" His tone held savagery again. "Am I not gentleman enough, is that it? A poor player, a mountebank, the butt of every clown? Too low to be admitted to your bed? You pleasure old Knollys cheerfully enough . . ."

"No," she said angrily, lifting her head.

He caught her by her hair, wrenching her head back and forced his mouth down over hers, biting her lips then kissing her so hard she felt the saltiness of blood against her tongue. Kneeling, he lifted his mouth and whispered, their eyes close together, "The whole court knows Knollys lusts for you. With my own eyes I saw you kiss him several times. He puts his fat hands in your bosom. He pants after you like a dog after a willing bitch. Do you ask me to believe he hasn't had you? And if he has, why not I too? You could not love him. He is old and rank with lechery. If you do it with him it is for other reasons."

"I swear to you I have never been to bed with him," she said in desperation. "Please, let me go. Leave me alone. Must I complain to my brother?"

He stared into her face, them changed his tune. Softly, coaxingly, he whispered. "I love you. If you knew how I love you, you would pity me. I am on fire. If I were a burning house you would bring water to douse my flames. Will you not quench me with your sweetness? I swear I will be gentle with you."

She looked at him through her lashes. His intent stare made her feel breathless. "You are too fierce," she said, pushing him away.

"I can be anything you choose," he said thickly. "I will be an instrument. Play on me. Only be kind to me."

She laughed, her dark eyes dancing with amusement. "You play strange tunes, Master Shakespeare. I am afraid of such an instrument."

"You are a woman," he said, half to himself. "And therefore cozen and mock and court dalliance while fleeing it. As well catch the wind in a net as try to hold a woman."

She lifted her hands to tidy her ruffled hair. His eyes stared at the graceful uplift of her white breasts. Leaning forward he put his mouth against them where they rose out of her gown. She went on straightening her hair, feeling the warmth of his lips pleasurably.

"Will you not once let me plunge into your sweetness?" he asked her, his lips travelling to the hollow at the base of her long throat.

She felt her traitorous body weaken to pliant softness. His offered passion was tempting. She was lonely and eager for love. Mind and body starved for what he offered. When his mouth rose to her lips she did not resist, her lips parting softly under the pressure of his. He groaned, his kiss deepening. Mall lost her head. Her hands crept to his chest, feeling the lean wiry strength of his muscles under her fingers, then stole up to his shoulders, clinging to him, as the kiss took fire.

"Sweet, sweet," he groaned without removing his mouth. "I love you. Love me a little. Cruel, tyrannous Mall. Hurt me, torture me, but for Christ's sweet sake, take me . . ."

Through the violent clamour of her roused senses a still cold voice spoke in her brain. What was she doing? She tore herself back from the brink of total abandonment and pushed him away, leaping to her feet.

"I can't . . ." she wailed. She remembered Richard's words of warning. Guard your heart . . . guard your heart, Mall . . .

He rose, too, his breath coming hard and thick. "You

cheating little whore," he swore. "You smile and beckon and run away for ever. There is a name for such as you. You move me to madness but yourself are cold as snow. You'll drive me too far."

Dick came running in at the door, the jug in his hand. He halted, staring from one to the other, seeing at once that something was wrong. "What is it? Not a quarrel, you two?" His voice held dismay. Shakespeare was his friend. Mall his sister. He did not want to see them quarrel.

Mall said quietly, "I must go, Dick. Will you take me down the stairs to my horse?"

Shakespeare turned away and stared into the fire. Dick frowned, looking at his back. "Of course, Mall," he said reluctantly.

As they went down the stairs he asked her anxiously, "What did happen, Mall?"

"We disagreed about a small matter," she shrugged. "It was nothing. He is a difficult man."

"Will?" Dick's voice was incredulous. "He is a sweet man. Everyone likes him except those who are jealous of his talent."

"Is he married?" she asked.

"Yes. His wife lives in Stratford. Some of the players have met her. They say she is a scold. Will sees as little of her as he can. His son died last year which made him very gloomy for a while. But he is a good fellow, shrewd in business and most eloquent with his pen."

"He was . . . friendly with Lord Southampton too, wasn't he?"

Dick flushed. "Yes. Harry was his patron. You know that."

"Just his patron?" she asked gently.

Dick's flush deepened. "Damn you, I doubt it. Harry liked to get value for his money." His tone was bitter. He gave her a suspicious look. "Why are you so curious?"

"I wondered if he were one of Harry's special friends."

"Well, I suspect he was, but I would have been the last to know. Harry's taste was catholic. He would try anything once."

She touched his arm sympathetically. "Poor Dick. I am sorry if I opened old wounds."

"Old wounds? They bleed every day," he said, turning away.

That spring Essex persuaded the Queen to be reconciled to his mother, the Countess of Leicester. The Queen allowed her to come to court and gave her an audience, but the very sight of the woman who had stolen Robert Dudley from her seemed to make the Queen furious again. The reconciliation was purely artificial. The kiss exchanged between the two old women was as brief as possible, and the Queen made it clear she did not want Lettice at court any longer than need be.

Nevertheless, it was a sort of victory for Essex. He seemed high in the royal favour again. The Queen called for him constantly and made much of him. His star seemed higher than ever, especially as the Queen had sent Robert Cecil to France on a diplomatic mission. With his chief enemy away, Essex had the Queen's ear without fear of interruption.

Cecil's father, Lord Burleigh, hastened back to court from his country house to defend his absent son's position. During a Council meeting Essex angrily insisted on full war with Spain. Burleigh, hating the expense and waste of war as much as the Queen did, tried to dissaude him from aggressive policies, but Essex was merely insolent towards him. Burleigh then drew out his psalm book and pointed to the line which read "Men of blood shall not live out half their days".

"Do you threaten me, you old fool?" Essex sneered.

Burleigh closed the book and quietly withdrew. The Queen stared after him then looked at Essex.

Towards the end of April Cecil returned from France having failed to convince the French king that he should not make peace with Spain on his own behalf without waiting for his allies, the English and the Low Countries, to be ready to make peace. France had already secretly made terms with Spain. The news was serious for the Low Countries. They now had no allies on the continent. Only England remained as their ally.

Cecil set to work immediately to turn the Queen's mind away from Lord Essex. Bred up by a father who hated war, Robert Cecil schemed constantly to end the Spanish war if he could, and he saw Essex as a threat to any hope of peace.

"Of course he shuns peace," he said to the Lord Admiral shrewdly. "In war he sees his best chance to seize power. Look how many knights he created in Cadiz? He made knights instead of making war. Each of those men is now sworn heart and body to Essex's cause. He is raising a private army for the moment when the Queen dies. If we were at peace it

would be harder for him. If we are at war, what easier than to seize the crown on the pretence of defending the kingdom?''

Lord Nottingham nodded sombrely. ''An ambitious, arrogant man, certainly. How will you check him?''

Cecil smiled that chill little smile. ''I need do little. Give him enough rope. He'll hang himself.''

As he predicted, eventually Essex's boundless arrogance burst out again. The troubles in Ireland had mounted year after year. They were desperate now. The Queen and her council debated who best to send to lead an army against Tyrone. The Queen suggested William Knollys. He was not only her cousin but she trusted him to do the job efficiently.

Essex looked sourly at Knollys. ''Your Grace would be mad to send a toothless old housedog to fight lions,'' he said maliciously.

The Queen's colour rose. Her eyes grew black with rage. Cecil softly asked, ''Who would you send, my lord?''

''Sir George Carew,'' Essex replied at once.

''Carew,'' the Queen burst out. ''One of your own fellows! You are too bold, my lord. You are always trying to push one of your friends into high place.''

Essex's face went white and stiff with temper. He rose and walked away, turning his back on her.

She leapt after him, boxing his ears furiously. The blow caught him unprepared. He swung round, his hand on his sword hilt. All at the Council table saw the glint of metal as the sword was half drawn. There was an incredulous, half gleeful gasp of horror. The very thought of someone drawing his sword on the Queen was enough to cause a riot.

The Lord Admiral, Lord Nottingham, sprang between Essex and the Queen, crying, ''For God's sake, my lord. Are you mad?''

''I neither can nor will put up with such an affront to my dignity,'' Essex shouted thickly. ''I would not have taken such a blow from Henry the Eighth. I'll certainly not take it from a woman, be she who you please . . .''

The Queen was standing with a fixed, white face staring at him past Lord Nottingham. She looked like a statue, her eyes carved deep, her mouth immovable.

Essex's friends sat rooted in shock and fear. His enemies were staring in triumph at his face.

After a moment's pause he turned and strode out of the room. When the Queen sent officers to find and arrest him he

had already left the Palace and was at Wanstead, his great country house east of London. Here he spent his furious energies in hunting the deer in his great park and fishing from the quiet waters of the river Roding that flowed through his lands.

"What did I tell you?" Cecil quietly asked the Lord Admiral. "The man needs no enemies. He is death and damnation to himself."

At first the Queen was incoherent with rage against him, but as her temper subsided she began again to miss him. His charm and physical attraction acted on her like a spell. With his presence withdrawn from her, she seemed only to remember what she loved, not his arrogance and ill-temper. Once or twice Mall heard her weep like a weak child, murmuring his name. Or was the Robin she called for her dead but unforgotten Robin Dudley?

As the heat of July deepened she fretted for him. Several times she was on the point of sending word to him to return, but the memory of his insolence always stopped her. Essex meanwhile was threatening those of his friends who had been frightened by his arrogance into making terms with Cecil. He made it clear to them in no uncertain words that they were either for him or against him, and that if they were Cecil's friends they could never be his, and would never get patronage from him again. Next time he went to war he would not offer them employment, he said coldly.

"You see, my lord?" asked Cecil. "This is how he plans to take the kingdom. When every soldier depends upon Lord Essex for his promotion, who will rule the kingdom? The army is in his pocket now. The Queen has put it there. I tell you, the man is dangerous."

"Yet you do nothing to stop him," Lord Admiral replied, wearily.

"I leave it in the hands of God and my lord Essex," Cecil said in his quiet little voice.

Early in August Lord Burleigh died after some weeks' illness. The Queen burst into tears when she heard the news, and shut herself up in her chamber without company. Cecil's father had been her chief minister ever since her succession. They had grown grey together in the service of the state, and she had always trusted and liked him more than any other of her servants. His death was like a warning knell in her ears. The only man living now to whom she had been as close was

her greatest enemy, King Philip of Spain, who was himself seriously ill and expected to die at any time. The Queen saw her world shrinking day by day. Death hovered behind her chair like a grey spider, spinning the web in which she herself would soon be trapped.

Her melancholy made her weaken towards Essex. At last she now sent him a message, but her messenger met Sir William Knollys, who sent him back to the Queen, telling her that Essex had a cold and was ill. Distracted, lonely, longing for Essex's company, she did not know what to do with herself. When Essex was in temper he could be a charming, distracting companion. She needed him now as never before.

Soon afterwards came news of a great disaster in Ireland and the need to choose a General to lead the army over there grew urgent.

Even his closest friends now believed that Essex should return. His isolation at Wanstead had left him vulnerable. Cecil daily had the Queen's ear. Essex could not afford to nurse his pride. He must come back to court if he were not to lose everything.

Essex persisted in demanding what appeared to be more or less an apology from the Queen. He obstinately insisted that she could not expect him to take a slap from anyone. "I am neither a slave nor a lackey," he said sullenly. "Cannot princes err? Is an earthly power or authority infinite?"

His protests echoed around London, finding an echo in many hearts. The spirit of civil discontent abroad in the kingdom seized on his words. Men who believed that princes had no rights higher than those of ordinary men wrote in praise of his stand.

"He dresses up his insolence in philosophical phrases and the gulls swallow them," Elizabeth said to Cecil bitterly. "All those who would pull down both crown and church flock to his door. Wanstead is alive with rebels. What is he playing at?"

"Let us hope he but plays the fool, your Grace," Cecil said piously. To Lord Admiral he was more open. "Essex is breeding himself another army by giving his name to all these malcontents who grow daily in the city. He fetches them all in, the religious rebels, the civil rebels . . . any who oppose the established order may join him. I tell you, my lord, he brews open rebellion. Sooner or later it will burst out."

Essex came out of his sulks to attend Burleigh's funeral,

where he wept more than any of the other mourners, which only made Robert Cecil hate him more. "The hypocrite!" he snarled as he watched.

Mall heard joyful news from Nan that August—her first child, a girl, had been safely born at Arbury. Sir William Knollys was asked to stand godfather to the child, and chose, surprising nobody, to have the child named Mary after her aunt.

Sir William wrote often to Nan, confiding his passion for Mall and his hope of marrying her. Nan wrote tongue in cheek with snippets from his convoluted, over-flowery letters. Mall's evasions the old man saw as mere flirtation. When she smiled, he called it high summer. When she was aloof he thought himself blasted by "an untimely frost" and lost in dark despair. Of all this he wrote openly to Nan, who in turn repeated it to her sister.

Nan added a postscript to her letter, asking that Mall write to Gawsworth.

"Our mother writes that she has never heard from you since you were there last. Send a few lines, sweet Mall, I pray."

Mall read the request with a twist of the heart. She disliked writing letters, and in any case had nothing she wished to say to her mother. Reading between the lines of Nan's letter she envied her sister's calm, uncomplicated life at Arbury. Nan had settled down to married life cheerfully. She ran the house like clockwork and made her husband happy. She wrote that she intended to nurse the baby herself, despite advice to the contrary. "For it will make both me and the babe happy . . ."

Meeting Henry Carey around the court Mall gave him the news, and he smiled with a melancholy gentleness. "I am glad to hear it. I write to her from time to time and she replies at intervals." His affection for Nan was constant but she gave no sign of returning it.

The whole court was too engrossed in the great Essex drama to have time to think of anything else, but in the week after Burleigh's funeral a new scandal broke. The Queen suddenly noticed certain changes in Mistress Vernon's figure, and all hell broke loose. The girl fled to Essex House, where Lady Essex protected her, and her family vengefully demanded that Southampton be punished for his vile seduction. While the Queen raved with the hysterical fury she always showed on these occasions, gossip began to mount. Within another

week it was known for certain that Southampton had secretly returned from France to marry the poor girl.

The marriage, far from calming the Queen, made her worse. She ordered her to be thrown into the Fleet and commanded the Earl to present himself in London.

The row gave her a new chance to approach Essex who was still claiming to be ill at Wanstead. The Queen sent her own physicians to him, and followed them by several messengers asking him to come to court.

This time Essex agreed to be reconciled. He returned to court and the Queen welcomed him fondly, kissing him several times. A sort of peace was restored to court, but the news from Ireland was so bad that no one could relax. Alex Radcliffe had gone over there to fight with the army but he was sent to the Low Countries instead. Meg was desolate, convinced he would be killed.

A new scandal also broke in the playhouses. Ben Jonson got into a duel and killed his opponent in Hoxton Fields. He was arrested and thrown into prison, where he pleaded benefit of clergy, an old legal trick whereby any man who could read and write might claim immunity from hanging. Instead, he was branded on the thumb with the letter T for Tyburn and his goods were confiscated. "One chamber-pot and a pair of worn shoes was all he had," Dick grinned. "They will not get fat on that."

In November the new Lady Southampton was delivered of a baby girl while Southampton himself was in Paris playing tennis and betting one thousand, eight hundred crowns on the game.

"Poor silly child, what has she married?" the Queen asked when she heard. Her dislike of the marriage had somewhat faded, but her hatred for Southampton was increased.

Essex was still protesting at every name put forward for the command in Ireland, and at last the Queen said furiously, "If you will shake your head at any name, why, who is left but yourself to go?"

Cecil softly said, "Then who but my lord is fit to go, indeed? He is the fittest to command, as we all know."

Essex looked at them in startled surprise. He had not imagined they would ask him to take command. Ireland was a dangerous country for Englishmen. Reputations were lost there. Yet it gave him the hope of success. He was torn between alarm and optimism, and, having been named, his pride would not permit him to say no.

Matters moved slowly, however, as they always did when the Queen had any say in things. She began to raise a loan from the City for six months at ten per cent interest, complaining all the while at the exorbitant interest charged these days.

Essex insisted that the battle-hardened troops in the Low Countries would be better sent to Ireland. Their places could be filled by new troops raised at home. He had no intention of leading an army of apprentice boys, he said. Raw soldiers were worse than useless.

That December the Thames froze over again. Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's men, were having trouble with their landlord, their lease having come to an end and he wishing to take possession of their theatre. Richard Burbage and his brother Cuthbert were furious and decided to outwit him if they could. Under the terms of their lease he only owned the ground not the building itself. So they leased a new site on the other side of the river, next door to the Rose, where their rivals, the Lord Admiral's men played, and while their landlord was out of London for Christmas the players demolished their old theatre and moved it, lock, stock and barrel, across the river on carts. The ice was strong enough to hold them. Over the frozen Thames they went in trip after trip until the theatre was stacked on their new site.

Their landlord returned to find the birds flown. All that spring following, they worked to erect a new theatre which they meant to call the Globe.

That Christmas, though, they played at court four times and the Queen was delighted with their playing. She took a purse from a lady-in-waiting and gave it to Mall, saying, "Thank them for me and give them this for their pains . . ."

Mall was reluctant. She had no wish to see Shakespeare again. But she dared not refuse. What reason could she give? So she went quietly to Richard Burbage, offering him the purse and the Queen's thanks.

Shakespeare was supervising the packing away of their props, but at the low sound of her voice he swung round. She hurried away, leaving Burbage eagerly counting the ten pounds the Queen had sent.

Mall had to walk along several dark corridors to get back to the Queen's apartments and she almost ran, aware that Shakespeare was following her, but he caught her by the arm savagely.

"Loose me or I'll call the guard," she said defiantly.

"Surely you can spare me one moment," he said between his teeth. "I have something to give to you."

"I can take no Christmas gift from you," she said, surprised.

He pulled out a roll of papers from his doublet. A wry smile on his face, he said, "These cost nothing but anguish, lady. You need fear no obligation in accepting them."

"What are they? Letters?"

"Sonnets," he said.

"Not the sweet sonnets you wrote to the Herbert boy, Master Shakespeare? Am I to read them?" They were already famous around the court. Many of the courtiers had read them and praised them to the skies. "You wish to show me sonnets written to a boy?" Her voice mocked.

"No," he said, flushing darkly.

"You are a chameleon, it seems, Master Shakespeare," she said. "You are determined like a true player to play in every role. Master to a maid, mistress to a boy . . ."

"You scold like my wife," he hissed.

"Then get you back to Stratford," she said. "There is your fittest bedfellow."

He seized her by the throat, shaking her furiously. "You are the only bedfellow I desire," he groaned, his face seeming to mist before her eyes as she struggled for breath.

Suddenly she was free, coughing and reeling against the wall. He made a low sound of misery, trying to take hold of her, but she struck him away.

"God help me, Mall, you drive me mad," he said, his voice thick with passion.

"Go away," she mumbled through lips which felt swollen from his attack.

"Come to me," he whispered, plucking at her skirt. "I love you to distraction. I think of nothing else night and day. You are in my mind, my body, my blood."

She looked at him, thinking in sickened sympathy of Richard. If she could speak to him wasn't that what she would say, pleading in utter humility for his love? Her eyes stared into Shakespeare's with comprehension and pity. What bitter jests life offered. If it were Richard standing here she would go to him without a second's thought and give him all he asked.

"How can you deny me?" Shakespeare burst out, his voice shaking. "I am sick unto death for you." He held out his hands as if he sleep-walked. They shook violently in front of

her eyes. "See what just the sight of you can do to me," he said hoarsely.

She heard the sound of heavy footsteps along the dark corridor and turned to flee, but he caught at her arm, imploring with a look.

"I cannot promise anything," she said, the sound of her own doubt in her voice.

"But you will try," he said, as if he were a child, his voice trembling.

She sighed. "I will try," she said, and ran, wondering if she were mad herself to even say such a thing, yet filled with pity for him. Fellow feeling betrayed one, she thought miserably. She had felt Shakespeare's pain as sharply as her own. Was this all love could offer after all? This ceaseless ache of torment in the flesh?

In the Queen's apartments a little group of men stood talking in sombre mood around her, while her thin face listened, her eyes fastening on their faces. The name Essex arose again and again and that tortured look came into the Queen's old face, so that Mall ached for her. Why would not they let her alone?

Among them she saw Richard's father-in-law, grizzled and worn, his eyes sardonic. He moved to speak softly in the Queen's ear and behind she saw Richard in a plain green doublet and small ruff, his lean body lounging against a chair. He frowned as he saw her and came over to her. It was so rare for him to speak to her that she looked at him dumbly.

"What has happened to your throat?" he asked in low tones, staring at her low-necked gown. "Has one of the other Maids tried to strangle you, Mall?"

She put a shaking hand to her throat, blushing. "I . . . it was a game," she said, pretending to laugh. "We got too rough."

His brown eyes narrowed and a sudden coldness came into his face. "We?" he asked sharply. "Those are large fingerprints for a girl to make . . ."

She felt burning bitterness towards him. Lifting her smooth dark head, she smiled coldly. "Did I say a girl made them?"

His eyes were riveted on her. "You have a rough lover, Mall," he said in a slow, flat voice.

She forced a soft laughter, flickering her lashes down to cover the emotion her eyes might betray. "Women do not

dislike a rough wooer," she said lightly. "Had you not heard that, Richard."

He turned and strode back to the Queen's quiet group and she sagged, shivering.

In the Maids Chamber later she took out the sonnets Shakespeare had given her and glanced over them, shocked awake by them. These were not sweet sonnets to a boy. They were written to her and held no sweetness. They were savage, direct, aggressive. They raged against fate that he was subject to her—he seemed more to hate than to love. One sonnet began: "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action . . ." and she read it again and again by candlelight. It had a cruel truth which wounded her. Passion breathed in every line he had written, a passion the more powerful for being reluctant.

She was reminded of the Queen's complex feelings towards Essex. The sonnets showed the same twisted love and hate. Her excited senses trembled like harp strings under the impact of the words.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ONE MORNING AS she walked behind the Queen's slow figure across the courtyard at Whitehall her breath suddenly seemed to stop as she saw Richard's weather-beaten face across the gardens. He was with his father-in-law, whose arm lay across his shoulders as they talked. Mall stared from a distance, imprinting his image on her retina. He looked older in daylight, she thought, as though his recent battles had used up some of that vital energy which had been his greatest strength. There was a dusting of silver among the dark red hair. Lines ran from the corners of his mouth and eyes: laughter lines, lines of pain, lines of experience. He was getting older and farther away from her. Her heart and body moved painfully at the sight of him.

The Queen halted and glanced across the gardens, beckoning. The two men were unaware of her, engrossed in their talk. "Run and fetch me that fellow of mine, child," she said to Mall, her weary old eyes filled with the affection she had for her cousin.

Mall walked across the garden, her long skirts brushing the low box hedges. She held her head high, holding her habitual cool hauteur on her face with an effort which strained every muscle. As she approached Richard's glance made the Earl look round. She sank into a curtsy, meeting his eyes, avoiding Richard's hard look.

"Her Grace would speak with you, my lord," she said quietly.

Nottingham looked over her head and smiled. "I'll come," he said, moving past her.

Mall rose, her head averted, feeling Richard's eyes on her face, but when she turned to follow the Earl, Richard captured her hand and she stood still, feeling her pulse beat under the tight grip his fingers exerted around her slender wrist.

"I hope you are well, Richard," she said formally, feeling the brown eyes probing her features but not daring to meet them.

His fingers tightened, hurting her. "Do you know what gossip is running around the court about you, cousin?" he asked acidly under his breath. "They say you sleep with Knollys, that the old swine waits only for his wife to die that he may marry you . . ."

She held her glance down. "I cannot help an old man's delusions," she said icily.

His body stiffened. "And are you Alex Radcliffe's mistress, too, Mall?"

She looked up then, laughing harshly. "Alex? If they only knew . . ." She bit the words back. She could not betray Meg even to defend herself.

"Only knew what?" The dark carved wood of his face was savage.

Her lids fluttered down. "It is a lie," she said.

"And the player Shakespeare," he asked bitingly. "Is that all lies too? My father-in-law tells me he saw you struggling with him in the corridors one night—the night you had bruises on your throat, Mall?"

Her face and neck were suddenly flooded with hot, betraying colour. She looked up, eyes betraying.

His mouth contracted. "No swift denials, Mall? So gossip can speak the truth, I see."

Her hands twisted nervously, a denial on her tongue but unspoken. He stared into her face, distaste and cynicism in the curl of his mouth.

"Why did I refuse to take you when you offered yourself to me?" he asked in a low, bitter tone. "Would I even have been the first, Mall? I should have known when you were so hot that I could not be the first, but like a blind fool I thought you innocent of everything but love . . ."

The Queen's strident voice hailed him peremptorily, and he bit off his scalding words to walk away, his last glance full of such contempt it shrivelled her.

She stood, fighting nausea, her body racked with anguish. She thought of the sheaf of sonnets hidden among her clothes. Had Shakespeare been passing them all round London, as he had his sonnets to the young Herbert boy? Did everyone at court smile secretly as she passed, thinking of those passionate, lust-filled lines? And Richard had believed her guilty, taken her embarrassment for a confession of sin committed! Oh, God, she thought bitterly, he cannot love me or he would not think I could turn to another man, loving him.

Richard left court almost at once, leaving her sick and empty, in no mood to be kind when she saw Shakespeare. He came among the court with his quiet, courteous, gentlemanly manners all the time. Across the great rooms she would outface him, her features frozen in ice-cold rejection, and yet it made her uneasy to feel those hot eyes burn on her at a distance.

When he tried to approach her she always moved away, remaining as near the Queen as she dared, knowing he would not try to come at her in the actual presence. She had ceased to visit the theatres with Dick, although he often invited her, and she guessed Dick had heard some gossip, for he never pressed her to come with him when she refused.

In March of 1599 Essex left London for Ireland. His departure had all the marks of a royal procession. Plainly dressed, he rode in the centre of a great throng of noblemen whose clothes were so rich they marked him out distinctively. The London mob following him, shouting themselves hoarse with adoration, pressing forward to see him closer. Behind him streamed those who were going with him, their faces laughing at the enthusiasm of the crowd. Out of the city walls, miles into the countryside, the mob followed them, still shouting for Essex. Above them all the sky shone blue and calm, but as they rode through Islington black clouds came out of the east and a storm broke, drenching the army. The thunder rolled like cannon in the darkened sky. Lightning split the air, striking some trees and consuming them like kindling. The crash and reverberation made the people look at each other in dismay.

Essex frowned. Southampton, riding on his left, looked at him anxiously. "It's an omen, Harry," Essex said roughly. "We go to our death or damnation."

Southampton's beautiful, spoilt face closed up sullenly. "Oh nonsense, Robin. Hear the people! They still shout for you . . ."

Essex looked round at the sodden, trudging shapes following behind, their hair flattened against dirty faces.

"Ireland buries Englishmen," he said flatly. "Cecil has sent me there to destroy me."

While he was away Cecil talked softly to the Queen of an evening and Mall heard below the surface of his soothing words the poison of his hatred for Lord Essex. At every turn the little man planted a dart in the Queen's flesh, making her

turn and twist in anguish, torn between her love and her increasingly jealous fear of losing her hold on the people.

Mall pitied her, yet she could not help but feel as Cecil did that Essex was too dangerous to let loose upon the world.

One afternoon the Queen, reading a message from Ireland, gave a groan, such a grey look about her face that Mall wondered wildly if Essex could have been killed. She went to her anxiously, and the old woman gave her a glance of misery. "Child, child, I have heavy news and a sad duty to perform . . ."

Richard! Mall felt a stab of such pain she almost cried aloud with it, her body a silent shriek of wincing agony as she stared at the Queen.

"Poor little Radcliffe's brother is dead in Ireland," said the old voice sadly.

For a second Mall's relief was like a burning joy in the back of her throat, then she thought of Meg, and her face went white as she took it in, knowing that Meg had begun to sicken when Alex left court. Sick of a pining grief for Alex which nothing could cure, Mall thought, understanding well. Brother and sister were one flesh, one mind. Apart, they dwindled like wax candles burning down. The world, for Meg, would have no meaning once Alex had left it, and Mall knew that was how she felt for Richard.

She looked down at the Queen, seeing her weariness. "Would you like me to tell her, your Grace?"

The Queen shook her head. "It is one of the burdens of my office," she said heavily. "One I hate, but must bear. Send her to me, child." She sighed. "He died in my service and she is my servant, too. Oh, how tired I am of everything, Mall . . ."

Mall saw Meg after the Queen had broken the news. Her face was so white the veins stood out like blue thread on her temples. Her sweet, kind eyes were dead, their light put out for ever. Mall bit back a sob on seeing her. "Oh, Meg, I'm so sorry . . ."

Meg nodded blankly and passed by. Mall cursed the ineffectuality of words. What could one say?

Going to bed Meg never got up again. Day by day she lost flesh. White and cold in her narrow bed she lay as if she were dead already, eating nothing, speaking nothing. Her eyes stared at the sky through the windows, but never moved or altered their expression. The Queen sent her own physicians

to nurse her, but they shook their heads, recognising the futility of anything they could do. Meg had elected herself for death and not even the Queen's loving pleas could alter it.

The news from Ireland was grim. Essex sat in Dublin doing nothing but complain and make knights. The Queen scolded and he ranted in reply. At last he came home suddenly and burst into her private chamber when she was still half-dressed, flinging himself at her feet, weeping and begging for her forgiveness.

On first seeing him the Queen thought he came to take her throne. The tense, still terror of her mouth said so. She had been half expecting this one day—the threat of armed revolt, her own enforced abdication, perhaps the Tower, or even death at his hands.

When he kissed her hand and began to beg forgiveness, pleading his love for her, his duty, his shame for his failure in Ireland, the Queen slowly began to breathe again, trembling now with anger.

But she raised him, smiling, and let him kiss her mouth. Mall saw, with pity and dread, how her thin hand came up to clasp his neck involuntarily.

Essex strode about the chamber, talking, excusing, laying the blame on others, and the Queen listened, smiling as if she swallowed every word.

"But you are tired and dirty, my lord," she said. "You must change your clothes. I'll see you again later . . ."

Believing he had won her back, Essex left, triumphant. The Queen looked round at the ladies of her chamber. "Leave me, go," she said sharply. They hurriedly obeyed, seeing storm signals in her face. "Not you, Mall," the Queen commanded as Mall turned away.

She held out her hand, the long fingers shaking.

Mall came and took it, sinking by the side of her chair to let her head rest on the Queen's dry hand.

"What am I to do with him?" the Queen asked hoarsely. "When I see him I cannot help but love him, but he is my death, Mall . . . he's my death . . ."

Cecil came sidling into the chamber, his dark eyes beady as he surveyed the Queen's face, to guess at her mood. Mall rose and curtsied to the Queen, meaning to leave, but the Queen clutched at her hand in panic-stricken anxiety. "Stay with me, Mall . . ." Lately she hated to be alone and clung like a child to those near her whom she trusted.

Mall sank back, close to the Queen's skirts, holding the withered old hand. Cecil's eyes smiled. "So, your Grace, my lord has returned from Ireland," he said smoothly.

"Cecil, he must be chopped down," the Queen said raggedly. "Such an oak will overshadow all my kingdom."

Mall felt her fingers tightening. Cecil was very still. He released a long sigh. Triumph? thought Mall, watching him, but he was too deceptive a man for her to be sure of anything he felt. He bowed. "Your Grace . . ." His tone conveyed nothing but obedience.

When he had gone, the Queen stared at the wall, her thin lips trembling. "The crown is heavy," she said, as if to herself. "If bears the weight of all the kingdom in it."

Essex, believing himself to have won her over, found himself instead abandoned to his enemies and on trial for his failure in Ireland. Meg died at Richmond that November, and the court went into mourning for her. Her death cast a shadow over the whole court. Mall could not weep. Her grief was too deep. Sometimes she felt as if it was her own loss she wept for—the loss of Richard—and bitter pain made her white and silent, like a carved stone statue which bears only the resemblance of life.

The Queen was in a difficult temper. Essex had fallen prey to his usual illness when under attack. The Queen sent her physicians to him, disturbed as ever by the threat to his life. Illness among her friends always affected her deeply.

Christmas came. Shakespeare was at court from time to time. His new patron, the young Lord Herbert, had been sent to make his bow to the Queen. Mall, sitting at the Queen's feet as she so often did now, watched the boy curiously as he came towards the throne. He was now nineteen, a tall, pale boy with curiously detached eyes. Melancholy or remoteness made his smile infrequent. He spoke stiffly, his thin body clumsy when he bowed. She could see what made Shakespeare find him so touchingly attractive. He had a heart-wrenching delicacy in his face. Ill at home in his richly decorated clothes, he had no gift for flattery. The Queen frowned, irritated with him. She had no love for hobbledehoys. She liked men to swagger, mouthing sweet praise like incense to her, masculine and wild as gypsies. This proud, cold boy held no attractions for her.

He wandered through the court, self-conscious, aloof, making no effort to please the Queen or make friends. His family had

dressed him finely to make his obeisance, but they could do nothing about his lack of interest in courtly manners.

Several of the maids eyes him provocatively, but he ignored their smiles. He neither danced nor played cards with the nobles. He rode alone, his manner brooding, and read books in his rooms, they said. It was apparent that he would make not so much as a faint pretence of wishing to attain the Queen's favour. The court eyed him thoughtfully, taking his measure, as they always did with newcomers. Would he nudge himself into a place of power? Which camp would he join? It was soon obvious that he cared nothing for the matters which exercised everybody else. His friends and family groaned in anguish, but William Herbert would not bend his proud head nor pretend to an emotion he did not feel. He carried his pride of birth wrapped around him like a cloak, disdaining to beg or flatter to gain anything.

Shakespeare was often with him. He was looking ill, Mall thought, catching sight of them once. His face had a tight, glazed look as if he had a fever, his eyes burning like coals in his head, his lips dry and compressed. Whenever he saw her those eyes focused on her hungrily and she flinched with terror. He still sent her angry, violent begging sonnets. She read them wretchedly, hiding them with the rest, wondering how many others at the court knew of them. Sir William Knollys brooded, watching her, still in full pursuit but beginning to know she evaded him. She no longer feared him as much as she did Shakespeare. There was something terrible in the player's fixed gaze which made her shudder.

The winter passed slowly. Essex was to appear before the Star Court, but such great crowds began to gather outside the house where he was kept that Cecil begged the Queen to cancel the event. They were all afraid of some great public uprising if he were taken through the streets like a criminal to be questioned in court.

Mall was astonished when William Herbert sought her out one day, his pale face intent. "Mistress Fytton," he said seriously, "I am bid to tell you that you are as cruel as you are fair . . ."

The careful way he uttered the words made her laugh openly. "You conned that very well, my lord, but you delivered it ill. Would you like to try again?"

For a moment he stared, his pale face frozen in disdain.

She looked back at him, her eyes dancing teasingly. Suddenly a faint spark of humour lit his strange eyes.

"I see why Will loves you, lady," he said clumsily.

She looked down, her lashes fluttering. "Did he tell you to say that, too?"

"No, I learnt that for myself when I saw your smile," he said softly.

Looking up, she considered him. His face was slightly flushed now, his mouth parted, as though he sighed. She almost thought she saw herself reflected in the glitter of his eyes; tall, slender, her black hair shining like a crow's wing, her skin white and smooth, she seemed to move on the pupils of his eyes as though she were captive under glass, her body swaying, her waist supple, her breasts high.

"I've read Will's sonnets," he said abruptly. "I thought them sad and sick but now I understand him. You have driven him mad, sweet lady. Will you not be kind to him?"

"I am kind," she said softly. "I keep away from him whenever I can, so that he shall not suffer by wanting what he can never have . . ."

"Poor Will," he said, watching her intently.

She looked down, her lips twitching with amusement. He had a boy's hunger in his eyes now. It touched her.

"Are you so cruel to all your lovers?" he asked huskily.

She surveyed him through her black lashes. "Ask them."

"I ask you," he said, his tongue tip touching his lower lip. She heard him breathing faster, his eyes darkening. Beneath his words she heard the echo of an emotion more personal than mere concern for a friend.

"I shall not tell you," she said lightly.

"Then I shall have to find out for myself," he returned, his tone thickening.

Her eyebrows arched delicately. "Shall you tell Master Shakespeare your intention?"

He flushed at that. "I am not answerable to a player," he said angrily.

"You came to me on his behalf," she reminded, her mouth wry.

"I had not seen you then," he said, his voice hot. "Will sighs for the moon, like the farmer who saw it reflected in his pond and tried to catch it in a net . . ."

"Then like the farmer let him fall in and drown," she said with a shrug.

"Will was right. You are as cruel as you are beautiful," he said, but he sounded more pleased than disapproving.

She laughed. "And you are disloyal, my lord. You came to beg for Shakespeare. Do you now beg for yourself?"

"Yes," he said shamelessly, moving closer, his hand finding hers and capturing it.

"I am not for sale, my lord," she said, pulling her fingers away from him. Turning, she walked away, conscious of his eyes on her as her body swayed, graceful and slender, under her concealing clothes.

He left court soon afterwards. Gossip said to return to Wilton to smoke tobacco and read poetry, brooding moodily in the famous gardens of his lovely home.

At Easter 1600 snow fell suddenly on Easter Day itself, lying over the city like a white blanket, muffling the sounds of carts in the streets. The bitter winds blew down the river and men huddled into their clothes as they walked.

William Herbert returned to court and soon managed to catch Mall alone, kissing her hand before she could pull away, his melancholy eyes pleading with her.

"I thought of you endlessly at Wilton," he said. "You have cast the same spell on me, sweet Mall. Will and I are in the same boat now."

"And have you told him so?" she asked drily.

"I'll not bare my heart to anyone," he said, as she had known he would. "But I've written some sonnets . . ."

"Not more sonnets," she groaned, teasing him.

"Read them," he begged, thrusting a sheaf into her hands. She looked at them, curious to know whether he wrote with the same hot intensity as his player friend.

That spring he besieged her with gifts, letters, sonnets. His verse echoed Shakespeare in every line. Mall was half amused, half tempted. He was of good birth, he was oddly attractive and she was lonely.

His pursuit became common knowledge. Her fellow Maids were slyly envious of her, some of them spiteful. His coldness to the rest of the court made his sudden passion for her so blatant that it became the talk of the day.

Walking with him in the private garden at Whitehall she caught Richard's brown eyes observing them and felt her body tense in the accustomed stab of pain. He was talking to one of the other Maids, who was laughing, and Mall guessed suddenly that Herbert and herself were the topic they discussed.

She shivered, and the boy beside her gave her a sudden jealous look. "Answer me," he insisted, and she realised he had asked her a question she had not even heard.

"What?" she murmured, eyeing him through her black lashes.

"Has Shakespeare kissed you?" The question was put fiercely.

She was angry. "Is that truly what you want to know?" She turned and faced him, her hauteur around her like a cloak.

He looked uneasy, a boy not sure of himself. "I never doubted your innocence, Mall," he said, fumbling the words, and she saw his pride, which would not let him believe her anything but pure, and his youth, which could not be sure, and was suddenly touched.

He bent, kissing her hands humbly. 'Forgive me, Mall," he said, and she smiled at his bent boy's head, feeling older and wiser.

When he had gone she walked through the long box alley, smiling to herself as she thought of him. His coldness to everyone else at court made his hot pursuit of her flattering.

As she turned to walk back Richard came through a walk and she felt her cheeks burn at the sight of him.

Her black head lifted in cool challenge, she swept him a low curtsy. "Cousin Leveson . . ." Her voice was melodic, indifferent, as if her body had not begun to burn at the first glimpse of his dark red hair.

He had a weary look about his eyes, as though he did not sleep. Dark shadows lay beneath them, and his mouth was tight with control.

But he gave her a wry smile of recognition at her aloof tone. "Are we strangers, Mall?"

"I think we must be," she said icily, her black eyes reminding him of what he had said to her the last time they met in private.

He shrugged. "Do you want me to eat my jealous words, Mall? I swallowed court poison and grew sick of it. I did not really believe any of their lies." His smile was self-derisive. "The thought of little Mall with Knollys or poor Alex Radcliffe was sheer moonshine . . ."

"And the player Shakespeare?" she asked, her curved brows lifting coldly.

His brown eyes had flame in them. "He desires you, Mall.

Be wary of the man. I've seen some of the sonnets he pens to you, and he's sick with need of you . . ."

She flushed, looking down. "He sends them to me and I tear them up," she said, not adding that she read them first with a shudder of sick premonition, as though the man himself spoke to her.

Turning aside she plucked some green leaves, crumpling them in her small white fingers. Richard moved nearer, his eyes on her profile. She felt him so intensely she could scarcely breathe. Hunger made her body ice-cold and yet feverish.

"They are laying bets on how long it will take young Herbert to lose all his pride and marry you," Richard said lightly. "It is a rich match. Your father will be very proud."

She did not answer, concentrating on the green leaves below her nervous, plucking fingers, bitterly wishing he would go before she began to cry and beg for his love. She had no strength to leave him if he stayed, and she was afraid to speak or look at him, for fear she let him see how he could move her still.

"They say it is no surprise the boy has lost his head over you," Richard said, his voice closer. "You both wear that cold, proud look as you walk the court. They do not know you as I do Mall. You've worn your court mask so long I almost begin to forget there is a gentle child beneath it." He moved nearer, slowly, as though drawn towards her by a force he could not resist, and she could feel his eyes on her averted profile. "Do you love him?" he asked, his tone dropping.

She ran a trembling tongue over her dry lips. She dared say nothing. Any word she spoke now would betray her. He was not wearing perfume, as so many at court did, and the clean fresh smell of his skin filled her nostrils until she was almost fainting with it.

"You have grown wise, little Mall," he said abruptly. "Once you blurted out your childish secrets to me without fear. You have learnt to guard your heart. I am glad you have found a lover you may go to in all honour. I shall dance at your wedding with a merry heart."

She felt each word like a dagger thrust. Turning, casting leaves from her white hands carelessly, she tried to give him a bright smile, feeling her lips quivering crookedly. "Thank you, cousin . . ."

His eyes reached probingly into her face, he took her hand and bent to kiss it. Her fingers jerked as she felt his touch, and he looked up quickly at her, catching her before she had time to control her look of hungry, obsessive need.

He straightened. "Mall . . ." His voice held a tortured mingling of hoarse emotion.

Her mask slipped totally. She swayed, white to the black line of her sleek hair, her eyes and mouth out of all control. "Richard . . ." Words could not say what her look and shaking voice said and he gripped her hands, holding them down between them as a barrier, as if he feared that any other movement would precipitate disaster.

"Christ Jesu, forgive me," he said thickly. "I thought you were turning to him. Mall, you must put me from your mind. You are killing yourself, child. I can give you nothing. Pembroke can make you a countess and put you above hurt for ever. Forget me. Take Pembroke." His hands gripped until they made her wince. "You must marry him, Mall, and forget me."

"Forget you?" Her voice was bitter. "How can I? Every time I see you in a room I want to die. I can no more forget you than I can forget the sun. I live only when I am in sight of you."

His face was drawn into lines of taut pain. The brown eyes ate her face. "For your own sake, be wise," he said between lips that were white. "Marry and be happy, Mall."

He turned, releasing her hands, and went, and she stood in the bright garden feeling the chill of rejection consuming her. There was no escape from the empty future.

In June Nan Russell married. Weddings and deaths depressed the Queen equally. Nan's family had had a difficult task to persuade the Queen to accept the marriage, but she was reluctantly present in the end, her mood changeable and melancholic.

Mall led the other maids in a masque after supper. They wore cloth of silver gowns with carnation mantles, their hair worn loose on their shoulders, woven with silver ribbon. The costume gave Mall's dark hair and white skin a strange, barbaric glitter.

"You look like the moon," William whispered to her. "A wild, unpredictable lady."

She gave him a glance, amused by the hot passion in his face. Increasingly, she found the power she had over him

comforting. Love had betrayed her into worse grief than hatred had, and it was flattering to be in command over his eager emotions.

Dancing, she saw Richard with Bess Newell, wife to Sir George Newell, who at sixty was already fast becoming senile. Bess was a voluptous, dark woman whose love affairs were legion, and notorious. Free from her unfortunate husband's attentions since his illness, still in her early thirties, she found the erotic hothouse of court agreeable. Turning in the measure, her hand leaving William's, Mall saw Richard's hard mouth curling in an intimate smile upon the other woman's face, and jealous bitterness salted her mouth. He was finding his necessary pleasures at court now, was he? His scruples did not extend to enjoying the favours of a married woman who had already pleasured half the court.

"Why are you frowning, love?" William asked anxiously, as she went back to him. "Have I offended you?"

She pulled herself together, smiling at him. "My shoes pinch," she said lightly.

The Queen sat alone, watching the dance with weariness. Mall caught sight of her and went to her gently. "Will Your Grace not delight us by dancing?"

Looking her up and down, a discontented sigh came from the pale withered lips. "What do you represent?"

"I am Affection, your Grace," said Mall, smiling, having played that part in the masque.

"Affection?" The Queen gave an agonised gasp. "Affection is false."

Mall felt the cry intensely. Her pitying eyes looked down into the weary old face. Her hand sought the Queen's to hold it comfortingly. "No, no, your Grace," she said quickly.

The Queen sighed. "You are a kind child, Mall. Well, I will dance, as you wish it . . ." and got to her feet, her steps stiff and slow, while the court fell back to applaud as she slowly moved in a stately measure. Watching her, Mall thought of dead Robert Dudley and the buried years when the Queen had been a young, hot-blooded woman, denied love for reasons of statecraft. Now she had passed from her bright spring to cold winter without any warm summer of love between. Mall's heart winced. Was she to share that fate? Would her years spin down to the grave emptily with nothing but the long ache for Richard's arms to remember in her old age?

The Queen sat down again, worn out quickly, and the court

began to dance again while she talked to Robert Cecil quietly, her chin on her hand.

Richard appeared beside Mall, bowing. He wore black and silver thread, and the fine silvered threads among his red hair seemed to be the reflection of his doublet in the candlelight. For a second she looked at him helplessly, grateful for the long court training which enabled her to pull the mask over her face.

"Will you dance, cousin?" he asked quietly.

"Do cousins dance?" She fanned herself, sighing, her manner light. "It would be too dull for you, I fear. Surely your last partner must be looking eagerly for you, cousin, and I would not want to hold you from her."

His eyes narrowed speculatively on her face. "Bess Newell is a very eager huntress, Mall," he said drily.

She pretended amusement, her fan affording her some protection from his too perceptive gaze. "The lady does not devour her prey, they tell me."

His eyes continued to watch her too closely for comfort. "Other men have sated her hunger and escaped alive, you think?"

Her throat closed jealously. She held the fan to guard the wince of her mouth. Somehow she managed to speak between her trembling lips.

"And found the ordeal not unenjoyable, so they say . . ." She was playing the court game of light amusement as well as she could, striving to retain a smile in the black eyes.

"Well, poor lady, with a half-mad husband she is as much in need of comfort as myself," he murmured. His brown eyes were lowered. "It might be a kindness if the fox stopped running." He looked up, giving her a faint smile. "We must all find what comfort we can in a cold world."

William loomed behind him, white jealousy in his face. Richard gave him a cool bow. "My lord . . ." He turned back to Mall, not quite meeting her eyes. "Good night, sweet cousin. I leave you in my lord's tender care."

Watching him walk away, his lean tough body standing out among the silken langeurs of the other men, William frowned. "That's the Earl of Nottingham's son-in-law, isn't it?"

"And my cousin," Mall said lightly, watching with hard, hungry, jealous eyes as Richard kissed Bess Newell's plump white hand lingeringly. The two of them spoke with open intimacy, and Bess Newell's husky laughter rang out in the

room. Oh God, Mall thought in anguish, watching as Richard and the other woman moved discreetly from the room. He is going to her bed.

"We never see each other alone to talk," said William frettingly. "Mall, why will you not come to my rooms to see me? I must speak with you privately. How can we talk with so many others watching us?"

She barely heard him, her mind tormented by other thoughts.

He sought her hand, crushing it in his own, and she looked at him. She thought of Richard with his new mistress, and looked at the boy's pleading, white face. He looked so young and vulnerable, that youth of his touching her.

"Mall, please," he begged, squeezing her hand. "I am in torment. The other maids visit their friends. Why will you not visit me?"

A battle raged inside her, tearing her savagely. She drew a sharp breath. "Very well," she said, bending her head as though it hurt to speak.

His eyes shone with excited brilliance. "Swear you will come," he whispered. "When?"

"Tonight," she said heavily.

He looked amazed, and the pale eyes widened. Mall turned and walked away. What mattered anything now? When the palace was silent in sleep she put on a long, white cloak and walked past the guards, who ignored her discreetly, used to secret comings and goings. Looking up at the secret moon she wondered where Richard was, and ached with sickness at the thought of what he was doing. Her pride would not let her pine with grief while he was enjoying Bess Newell. He had told her deliberately, not caring how his words stabbed. She had embarrassed him with her love. She never would again.

In William's lodgings she shivered and he drew her to the fire. By the pale candlelight she looked at his face curiously. He kissed her, burying his face in the side of her throat. She began to shiver, her fingers feeling his fresh, smooth boy's skin.

"Cruel Mall," he said pleadingly, shaking against her.

His vulnerability was heart-rending. She looked at him with a gentle smile. Lately she had sensed that she could grow to love him if Richard did not so dominate her emotions. She found his company pleasant. They both preferred to talk quietly, instead of entering into the mad games of the court. She was cold and he offered her warmth. The ache of desire she felt for Richard must be eased somehow, she thought in

sharp temptation, or she would die of it. Richard had sought his own comfort. Why should not she?

He sat down on the bed, his mouth sulky, so like an angry little boy that she felt an ache of tenderness.

She sat beside him and put a hand over his on his knee. "Do not look so sullen. You promised to be good."

He looked at her through his lashes. "I love you," he said softly.

"You barely know me," she said.

"I love you," he repeated. He turned and took her shoulders, pushing her backwards on to the bed, his hands beginning to undress her fumblingly. She felt chilled. She had grown fond of him in the last months, but did she really love him? His mouth opened on hers and his tongue forced itself into her mouth, flickering, teasing. His hands were rough as they pulled the clothes away from her, but their roughness excited her. She began to breath faster, touching him in her turn, their mouths parting and coming together again and again.

His slender body naked in the firelight had a rosy colour. He was tall, with long legs and a smooth bare chest. She was consumed with curiosity about his boy's body, touching him with her fingertips, learning the feel and shape of him.

His eyes adored her, he swallowed, closing his eyes, and fell to his knees before her, as though she were a goddess. She stood remotely, dazed, feeling his hands run up her calves and thighs, his lips brush trembling along her inner flesh. He looked up at the small, high white breasts, the tiny waist, the flat belly and long white, tight thighs.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered passionately. "I worship you . . . see . . ."

When he paused she moaned, "Yes, yes . . ." And his mouth slowly touched between her tight thighs, parting them. She shuddered with pleasure, groaning. He raised his head again to look up at her. She saw his face in the candlelight dimly, his skin flushed, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Does that please you?" he whispered, his tongue passing over his lips.

She felt her breasts aching, so hot and heavy they seemed no longer familiar to her. She put her hand on one, her fingers stroking down towards the nipple, feeling the dry, burning skin tingle. As if the movement excited him again he lowered his head, his tongue moving in hot intrusion, bringing her shuddering senses wildly to life.

She shut her eyes, murmuring his name, her head moving rapidly from side to side in the sweetness of her surrender. His body twisted upward against her, smoothly, his hands slid under her and lifted her, his nakedness lying between her splayed thighs. Aroused to the point of fevered abandonment she pressed her face against his shoulder.

There was a hard, fierce pain; she cried out sharply, pulling away. "Dearest," he whispered, his mouth searching for hers. She still struggled, hurting and afraid, but his kiss deepened and the soft tenderness of his hands soothed her.

"You hurt me," she whispered shiveringly.

He moved inside her and she protested. "No, it hurts . . ."

He dropped light, soft kisses on her mouth, continuing to move as insidiously as a snake. Slowly she forgot the pain. Her breath came shudderingly. She began to move with him, gasping.

His hands made constant pilgrimage over her, making smooth sweeping motions down her breasts and hips, along the curved spine and the small buttocks. She let herself respond, touching him experimentally, feeling him draw sharp breath when her caress pleased him, repeating it again and again. The slow mounting clamour in her blood passed beyond recovery. She felt him begin to jerk, his voice splintering in sobbed ecstasy, then she was swept up into a spiral of such piercing pleasure that when it ended she could have wept for it to begin again.

He held her down, his knees anchoring her under him, the firelight gleaming gold on his white body.

"Sweet, white-thighed wanton," he said softly. "Alas, poor Will . . . never to hear you make that clamouring noise . . ."

She froze, frowning up at him. Something in his face disturbed her; a cruel, self-willed triumph which broke into her mood, destroying it. There was not love in his voice now, only mocking triumph. And what he had called her reminded her too bitterly of Shakespeare.

"Why bring him up now?" she asked angrily.

His hands squeezed her breasts hard. "I'll do whatever amuses me, mistress," he said coolly. "I've paid my toll. I played your little game up to the last. I courted, flattered, sighed like the rest. But I've no mind to play the heartsick lover all my days. Let us be plain and open with each other. I'm no doting boy. I'll pay my shot, whatever that may be, but from now on I'll have it honest between us . . . I enjoyed

you enough to want you again but on my terms, not yours."

She was stunned into incredulity. "You don't love me," she whispered, staring at him, seeing the alteration in his face with disbelief. "It was all an act . . ."

"Love you?" his mouth was malicious. He slapped her face viciously, sending her head spinning. She sprawled, sobbing, while he watched her as if he found her shock and pain pleasurable.

"Why?" she moaned through lips which were swollen with tears. "Why, William?"

"You may torment poor Will, but you'll not deny me," he said, and she saw that he was revenging his friend. He had planned it from the start. That proud, cold heart of his had never been touched. He had merely decided to pay her in her own coin, using her as the wanton Shakespeare had taught him to see in her image.

She withdrew from him, chilled and sickened, turning her head away, her black hair hiding her expression from him. Getting up she began to dress, her hands shaking. It seemed to her the last bitter jest of fate.

His strange, cold eyes probed her expression and a strange look crossed his face. "You'll come here when I want you," he said. "I find whores unclean and you give me pleasure, Mall. I will tell you when I need you."

She ignored him, dressing as fast as she could. If she stayed she might be sick, she thought. He had used her as one of the whores he spoke of so contemptuously, and she had been so utterly responsive that she despised herself. Even despite her state of shock she could not pretend she had not found those moments agonisingly sweet.

Flinging her cloak around her she moved towards the door. He was faster, standing in front of it, his arm barring her way. His proud, cold smile mocked her. "You'll come to me, Mall," he said huskily. "We both know you'll come. You are a cozening little whore, but at your game you are incomparable . . . and you liked it as much as I did . . . do not pretend otherwise . . ."

She stood, head bent, waiting. His arm dropped and he stood aside with a courtly, derisive bow. Mall went out and walked back to court in a cold, sick daze.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RICHARD WAS ABSENT from court again. He had gone down to Devon, she heard, and she was grateful for his absence now. Even Bess Newell's complacent talk of him, heard at a distance, did not touch her. She had gone to William to find the love Richard denied her, and the shock of discovering his treachery left her too dazed to do more than feel resigned to her fate. She had pursued a chimera when her life's experience should have taught her that love was not for her. Never before had she so mourned Meg's loss. She could have talked to Meg and felt herself understood.

She met William daily in the court, and when he bent to kiss her hand stared into his pale, proud features. His manner to her now was openly possessive. He left no doubt in any minds that they were lovers. All his humility had gone. His eyes spoke intimately to her across the public rooms, and although she avoided his gaze, he began to haunt her. The frenzied abandonment with which he had made love to her had its own allure.

Her long, aching need for Richard had tautened her physical needs into a tight spiral which William had released, and having tasted the sweetness of that utter relief she began to need it again. Around her the court buzzed with talk of love's pleasure, and she could not close her ears. William's eyes invited her constantly. Gradually she weakened as the clamour of her blood rose, until one night she went to his lodgings after one of his murmured demands, knowing she could no longer resist him.

She winced at his expression. He is cold, cruel and implacable, she thought, but he seemed now to move inside her head night and day, a pale, beckoning figure whom she could not resist. His hands moved to her fastenings and she swayed, hearing him laugh softly as he saw her abject surrender.

The summer wore on with long, hot days and stifling

nights. She spent more and more time with William, unable to stay away from him. The hold he had over her senses deafened her to everything but him. He had only to look at her in the presence chamber for her body to quiver in hungry response. He knew the power he had. His mouth would lift mockingly at her.

Richard returned to court unexpected. She had pushed him to the back of her mind, so preoccupied with her hours with William that she could not bear to think of anything. The sensual pleasures he gave her satisfied enough of her body to silence her heart.

When the familiar dark red head appeared among the band of courtiers waiting to make their bow to the Queen one morning she felt a sick qualm run over her body, and her face went quite white. William languidly moved to kiss her hand at that moment, and looked at her with a lifted brow.

"What's amiss?"

"Nothing," she lied.

How long, she thought miserably, before Richard knows that I am William's mistress? The whole court knew, and within hours if he did not already know, someone would tell him.

They met in a corridor as she hastened to join the Queen. Her nerves leapt as she saw Richard coming towards her, and she looked down, vainly hoping he would not speak. His hand grasped her wrist, hurting her so that she gasped.

She looked up, biting her lower lip.

There were flames in the brown eyes. "Tell me this time that the gossip lies," he said bitterly.

She pulled her hand from his grip, although he held it cruelly, and ran, tears running down her face.

That night she did not go to William, sickening at the idea, but next day in the gardens she saw Richard with the smiling, voluptuous woman who had pursued him before, and as she passed them heard Richard laughing, saying intimately, "At ten tonight, sweetheart . . ."

Her dark eyes looked round involuntarily at him and his glance slid towards her, light contempt in his face. He gave her the casual bow he might a stranger, and she walked on, eaten with pain.

She went back to William, and he received her with eagerness, her night of absence having puzzled him. "I thought you grew tired of me," he said oddly, scanning her face.

"I was sick." she said lightly, and thought how true her words were.

He took her passionately and as she surrendered she did not know for a moment whether the fevered desire she felt for him was not the seed of love. She only knew at that moment that he could have her whenever he wished, and she had no power to deny him.

Slowly their relationship was changing. Once he said her name as he made love to her, the tone of his voice so charged with passion that it made her quiver. Once, as she undressed, she caught an odd look on his face, a wary, secretive, tense expression that closed up quickly as she looked at him, but not before she had realised that what glimmered in his cold eyes was an emotion she had never seen there before.

He had to visit his family for a week, and while he was away she thought soberly about her future. Her family must soon hear of the affairs. All London seemed to know of it and laugh. She should stop seeing William now, she told herself, before it was too late.

But he came back, his eyes across the presence chamber burning on her, and whispered in her ear when he could, "Tonight, Mall . . ."

His hand came down cruelly on her wrist, he turned her towards him, his face white. "Tonight," he said very quietly.

She went, and he made love to her almost with desperation, his need so hot he was shaking with it. He gave her such pleasure that she cried out, her mouth open on his bare white shoulder, her body wrung with passion. "Love me, love me . . ."

She heard his breath catch and he stared down at her, his lips caught between his teeth, as though biting back some fierce response. They looked at each other, their flesh trembling. Then his face hardened, and he gave her a savage smile.

"You'll never hear me say I love you, Mall . . ."

Yet she heard something behind his words which made her sure he felt more than lust for her. They had begun badly, but she sensed he was beginning to need her, to feel in a way he was yet reluctant to feel. One day, she thought that night in her own bed, she would see love in those cold eyes, and then she might begin to feel for him how she had felt for so long towards Richard. She could love William. He could be a gentle, tender companion in some moods. Their harmony in

bed was more than mere physical pleasure. They would one day be happy together.

A week later she was suffering as she had never imagined she could suffer. William began a deliberate, public pursuit of another of the Maids of Honour, flattering her, dancing with her, avoiding Mall. Mall was made aware of the jokes which flew around the court. Mary Howard revelled in the opportunity to inflict pain, and lost no chance to twist a knife inside a wound. White with sleepless agony Mall watched him with her rival.

The girl passed her, laughing, with William in attendance, and all eyes turned on Mall to watch her reaction. Richard, among the throng, moved abruptly to stand in front of her, his tall body sheltering her from the curious eyes.

"How is your sister, cousin?" he asked in formal courtesy, his eyes reading her white face perceptively.

"Very well, I thank you, cousin," she said, somehow managing to speak without a trace of jerky shame, although she found it ironic that it should be Richard who stood, protecting her, but reading her misery with those clear, cold eyes.

He spoke easily of Arbury, of Gawsworth, his tone meant for listening ears, but his brown eyes peeled the faint attempt at coolness from her face, as if he forced her to reveal to him exactly how she felt, giving her no refuge for her misery.

The court grew bored quickly. Soon they were aware that attention had wandered from her, and she moved to escape, but Richard's hand held her, his voice suddenly very low and meant for her ears only.

"Is it over, Mall? I could have warned you. I told you once to guard your generous heart. You should have held him off until you had his ring upon your finger."

She twisted out of his grip and moved away without reply. The last person in the world whose sympathy or kindness she wanted was Richard. Every look, every word, branded itself into her skin like a mark of public shame.

That night she went to William's room to find out if her rival was there—she had to know, to see them together. When his lodging door opened she stared, dismayed, into Shakespeare's face. Backing, she stammered, "Lord William . . . is he within?" Her face burnt with embarrassment. She had seen nothing of Shakespeare for weeks and his appearance shocked her. She could not bear him to be a witness to

her lack of pride in coming here. But if Shakespeare were here, she thought, her suspicions must be false. William would not have him here if he were entertaining a mistress.

"Come in," he said roughly.

Hesitating, she walked in and he closed the door behind her.

Mall halted inside William's chamber, turning, her face white, as she saw he was not there. Shakespeare leaned on the closed door watching her mercilessly, his face wearing the glazed, strained look he had when he saw her.

"This is where he has you," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

"Get out of my path," she said, watching him in sudden terror.

"You and the boy," he panted, his lips pale. "He's changed since he began riding that white belly of yours. He was a remote spirit. You've lent him your fever. Now he burns in your sweet hell as I have done so long."

She backed as he came towards her until she could go no farther, her spine against the wall. His sallow face was filled with madness. He pressed against her, his hands oppressive instruments of pain. The glare in his eyes was like the fire of hell.

"Don't . . . oh, God, please, don't," she begged, shuddering.

His mouth searched for her lips. She turned her head, sobbing, struggling uselessly. He was too strong for her to escape him without a violent struggle which could only end in more violence, and she sensed he would not stop at using any means in his power now.

"This time you don't escape me," he said harshly. "The boy and I shall share you."

She began to scream. His hand clapped down on her mouth, stifling the harsh sounds, and the wild enflamed eyes stared at her, watching her hungrily.

Against her ear he whispered, "William is with her at my rooms. You've taught him well, sweet wanton. Now he is teaching her."

The pain was like a cancer in her heart, turning it to stone. She closed her eyes. Tears trickled down her face. He lifted her and carried her to the bed. She made no further resistance. For years she had felt this man behind her, his hot breath scorching her neck. She had always known that one day he would catch her. There was no escape. And at this

moment she needed to assuage her own jealousy by an act of treachery in turn.

On the bed Shakespeare was in no hurry to take her. His hands stripped her gently, stroking her as she lay open to whatever he desired, her body sprawled unresistingly beneath him. She felt no desire, only a throbbing ache like a thorn pressed into her flesh. A faint compassion pricked her, hearing the smothered sob of his breath as he put his mouth against one of her breasts, taking the pink nipple between his lips, his hands pressing into her taut belly.

Her own sensuality betrayed her gradually as his mouth began to move down her body. Her back arched in sudden reaction. She felt a groan burst from her very stomach. The slow, repeated caresses had a mindless seduction. He was more experienced than William Herbert. His lips and tongue teased, and having discovered how to arouse her he continued until she was past remembering anything but a driving need for release from her aching pleasure.

He slid between her parted thighs, shaking as if with an ague. But, as before, he needed to hear her say she wanted him, begging her to say it, his eyes hungry.

She moaned all the words he wanted her to say, her naked limbs thrashing, and when he entered her she met him eagerly, drawing him into her with a low, shivering groan. He was flushed, incoherent with long-denied desire. His body drove again and again while she shudderingly arched herself against him, her mouth open under the intrusive thrust of his tongue. Through her own abandonment she heard him crying out her name. "I love you, I love you," he groaned in mounting frenzy.

Afterwards he lay with his head on her breast like a weary child. The dark colour had ebbed from his face. He looked utterly sated. Mall felt the gentle sadness which always came after the act. Her lids closed and tears squeezed out beneath them. He raised his head and looked up at her, his finger taking a tear from the corner of her mouth.

"Don't . . ." he said hoarsely.

She opened wet eyes to look at him.

He moved up her body to kiss her, his mouth tender. "Sweet, dark wanton ," he whispered.

"William calls me that," she said, shivering.

His face darkened again. "I know," he said jealously. "He borrowed it from me. Before he ever met you . . ."

"He hates me," she said. "Because of you, he hates me. He made me love him to take his revenge for the hurt I gave you . . ."

Shakespeare shook his head. "It is not my hurt he revenges, but his own . . . William's mother is a gentle succubus who takes everything from those she loves, body, mind, spirit . . . sweet, tender mother who will not let him breathe . . ."

"His mother?" She was incredulous. "What have I to do with her?"

"Only that you are a woman," Shakespeare said, stroking the dark hair on his chin. "He is afraid to love a woman because his mother sucked him dry. When I talked of you to him, he wove your image into hers and made you one being. He wanted you, but he would not love you . . ."

She winced. "I thought he was beginning to love me of late, but then he changed suddenly . . ."

He looked thoughtful. "Perhaps he also suspected he was beginning to love you," he said slowly. "So he has burnt out fire with fire. He has taken another woman to forget you. I know him now. It is what he would do. He can be cruel . . ."

"Cold and remote," she sighed wrenchingly. "The coldness goes right through him. It was not enough to have me give myself to him. He had to make me his entirely, body and soul . . ."

He looked at her, his eyes dark-circled with pain. "As I am yours," he said thickly. "All these years pursuing a dream . . . I would have murdered to get you. I have been mad with desire."

She felt pity now, seeing his face contorted with his pain. "Well, it is over," she said on a sigh.

"Over?" His lips parted, moist and shaking, his tongue moving over them as he looked down the curved whiteness of her body. "Do you think once would be enough for me now? If you lay with me for a year I would not be satisfied."

The stroking pilgrimage began again and she lay back, her eyes closing. It eased her pain to have him worship her like this, his finger-tips seeking out her most sensitive places, awakening pulses in her throat, her limbs, her body. The gulf between sensuality and love was immense, but sensuality was sweet enough if love evaded one, and his driving, impassioned need for her was a comfort in itself.

When she was leaving he kissed her hand, as humbly as a servant. "Will you let me see you again?"

She sighed. "I do not know. If I can."

He was anxious, pleading, but she left him and hurriedly walked back to the Palace through the grey dawn streets. A blackbird on the Palace roof poured out his heart to the milky horizon. The guards slept at their posts. Slipping between her sheets in the silent Maids Chamber she felt tears on her face. A cold chill ache possessed her. What had happened left her feeling unclean. She felt as though she were becoming a stranger to herself. The easy love affairs of the court had not yet corrupted her sense of self-respect, and her response to Shakespeare disgusted her now.

William was practising for a tournament, coming back from the tourney yard drenched with sweat, physically exhausted. She realised a few days later that he had ceased to court her rival. Mall found no consolation in the other girl's wan face when William passed. She had resumed her own mask of silent hauteur in the court. It was a mask for which she was grateful now. It even kept Richard's too perceptive eyes at bay and for that she felt utter gratitude at times, sensing his quick, hard look when she was within eyeshot of William.

Sometimes passing William on the stairs, ignoring him, she felt him turn his head warily, like an animal seeking invisibility in a thicket.

Was Shakespeare right in guessing that William feared to love her because of his mother's draining presence in his youth, she wondered? It did not matter now. She was almost glad it was all over. She felt she would never be able to love or feel again.

A day later she discovered she was expecting a child. It was not unusual for her to miss a month in her lunar cycle, but when she began to feel sick on rising she was terrified. She could not long hide her condition living so much in the public eye. What was she to do? She would be disgraced, sent home as a wanton, and her mother would drive her out of her mind entirely.

Two days after her terrified realisation, Willaim met her in the garden walk and looked at her, standing very still. "Mall," he said, on a groan.

She searched his white face, wondering at his tone. He had tricked her before and she did not mean to be deceived again.

He lifted her hand, kissing her fingers, his face tortured. "I am sick with longing for you," he said shakily, and suddenly

he looked so young, a boy with a man's hunger eating at him.

"You ended it, not me, my lord," she said coolly.

"I ran to escape the trap of your sweet body," he said. "I was drowning in you. I had to get free."

"And did you?" she asked, staring at him.

His look was answer enough. "I love you," he said in a low, reluctant voice.

She looked at him, her eyes wide. "You swore you would never say that, William," she said softly.

"I have fought it until I am drained," he said, his cheeks hollow with pain.

Her heart seemed to turn over in relief. When she told him she bore him a child, she thought, surely he would marry her, and stave off the disgrace and shame which she had been expecting.

She went to him that night, meeting his unleashed passion with response, grateful for the love he was showing at last, his pale eyes worshipping her as they lay in bed together. The ravelled skein of her life was at last beginning to pull straight. She and William talked gently, as they lay with arms embraced, and their moments together had a totally new sweetness.

Her folly in admitting hope was made clear to her when Shakespeare cornered her, almost insane with jealousy, his face animal in its intense emotion. His lips were bitten raw. Blood showed on the pale skin of them.

"You cheating little whore," he hissed. "False to us both at once, can you never say no? I'd like to strangle you for the pleasure of seeing those dark eyes bulge from your white temples . . ."

"I love him," she said, terrified of him.

"Love?" His mouth spat out the word as though it burned him. "You fall on your back for anyone."

"Never for you again," she said, shuddering sickly.

His face burned. "Yes," he said. "Unless you'd have me tell him how you pleasured me too . . ."

She closed her eyes, white to her black hair. "Oh, Christ . . ."

"I will not," she groaned, pushing past him, and fled before he could follow her into the royal chambers. But she knew, at that moment, that her life was at full torrent now. She saw herself being tossed into oblivion and could make no effort to save herself. All she could do was salvage some moments from eternity to comfort herself when shipwreck

came, as come it must. She could not bring herself to confess to William and break the silver shell of delight which enclosed them, but the fevered insane words Shakespeare had mumbled at her left her with no delusions. Sooner or later he would tell William and destroy her.

The long winter moved onward. The court returned to Whitehall. Cressets flamed at the doors of the houses, as riding behind the Queen, she stared into the darkness of the sky. The leaping smoking flares lit the streets strangely, carving strange hollows in the faces which watched them go by. London shouted for the Queen, but beneath the usual clamour she received ran something darker. Lord Essex was at his house in the Strand, his door constantly open to all-comers. The Council were worried, but did not know how to proceed against him. He courted all the malcontents in the kingdom. Adored by the London mob he bred a secret ferment, and, short of imprisoning him permanently, which they feared to do, they could only look on impotently.

Passing one alley Mall caught sight of Shakespeare watching her from among a little knot of people. He looked like a man in hell, his eyes eating her, staring out of their white setting like black flames.

She looked away, shuddering. The threat of his existence marred her every waking second now.

Her body was growing heavier, thickening beneath her full clothes. Already some of the maids were eyeing her askance, and it would not be long before someone told the Queen the new gossip.

Leaving church one morning she met Richard face to face. His brown eyes skimmed insolently down her body and she felt her cheeks fire, knowing he had heard the gossip.

She moved to pass him but he stepped into her path, forcing her to halt. "Will he marry you, Mall?" he asked under his breath. "Child, you cannot wait much longer. Jesu, do you have to be told what a scandal will break any day? Does he not know? Has he no eyes?"

"I must attend the Queen," she said hoarsely, pushing past him.

She had not told William because she was afraid. Would his family pride permit the future Earl of Pembroke to marry his whore? A bitter smile etched her mouth. Even if Shakespeare's menace did not loom on the horizon she could not yet lean upon William's undoubted love. Richard had shown

her an odd mixture of insolence and gentleness which had tasted sourly in her throat. Oh, God, she thought. Why did he not take me long ago and then I should have avoided this tangle of misery and deceit. He had awakened her to the pains and desires of love then left her unsatisfied. Sometimes she felt she hated him. At others she wept, wishing for what had never been.

During that long, bitter winter, while Mall struggled with fear and misery, Essex sat in his house, brooding on his wrongs, listening to the siren voices of hotheads, forgetting all that experience should have taught him. They both moved to their crisis together like straws caught on a running whirlpool.

After Christmas Mall told William the truth. Standing by the fire in his lodgings, shivering, she said flatly, "I am with child."

His face went into confusion: pain, anger, surprise, anxiety moved across his face so fast she hardly distinguished between them.

"My child," he said, not doubting it.

"Yes," she said. Of that at least she was certain by the dates. At that moment she neither hoped nor expected anything.

"When?"

"The spring," she said.

"So soon?" His eyes widened. "Why have you never told me?"

"I thought you must see," her voice said dryly.

"We must be married," he said, his face concerned.

Her heart leapt. Joy burnt deep within her. She looked at him gratefully. "William . . ."

"I go home soon to visit my father," he said slowly. "We will tell him then. He is sick to death, but I must right what I have done to you." He looked at her almost shyly. "I knew you were a maid the first time I took you, sweetheart, but Will's poison had worked in me and I could not believe it. I told myself I would hurt you as you hurt Will, but in the end I only hurt myself, because I loved you by then . . ."

She knelt and kissed his hands. "William . . ." He still had that boy's vulnerability which moved her. She would never feel towards him as she had towards Richard, but he touched some deep instinct in her, and she knew she could make him

happy. He was a strange, quiet boy. They could find peace together.

For two days she walked about armoured in security, feeling William's loving promise wrapped around her like a cloak. Then the bright bubble of her hopes burst when Shakespeare came into William's room while she was with him talking. Her face grew deadly white.

His eyes glowed like hot coals. William Herbert looked at him angrily. "Why are you here, Will?"

Shakespeare never even looked at him, devouring her across the room with his mad, wild eyes.

"I told you this morning, Mall and I are to wed," said William in nervous irritation. "Will, do you hear me? You cannot stay here now. If you would speak with me, come tomorrow."

Shakespeare turned slowly and looked at him then, his face cracking open as though it were of torn paper, his mouth loosening a string of molten obscenities.

"Would you marry your whore, my lord? A harlot who has come hot from your bed straight to mine and let me enjoy her after you?"

William's face was dead white, his eyes moving to Mall incredulously, seeking her denial.

"Has she hid from you that I've pleasured her, too?" Shakespeare asked savagely. "Men do not marry such as Mall. They take them, yes—but marry them . . . no, my lord . . ."

William was a cold statue, his frozen eyes on her white face. She wanted to deny it, but her mouth was too stiff to move, and she could only look back at him in utter despair.

There was a silence which held the air itself immobile. Even Shakespeare seemed trapped in it, staring at them.

Then William covered his face with shaking hands. "Oh, Christ, you whore," he moaned.

She found her tongue then, her voice low and shaking. "When you were with another woman what did you mean me to do? Wait patiently for you to come back? Why is my act so vile while you are guiltless? I was unhappy. I came here to find you, but he found me, and he made me do it with him. I let him because I was too miserable to stop him, and he frightens me. Ask him if I offered myself, William. Ask if I was willing. I never loved him. I never wanted him."

He turned his back on her. "Get out of my rooms. Get out of my life," he said hoarsely.

She walked out of the room. Shakespeare followed her, his wild voice muttering at her back. "Come to me now, Mall. I love you. I would love you if you spat on me. William is proud, he'll never take you back. I have no pride because I love you and love drives out pride . . ."

She looked at him bitterly. "Did I ever ask for your love? You have ruined me between you. I bear his child. It will have no name. For you I can feel only hatred now and for ever."

His face tightened in agony. She walked on and he did not follow any more.

William did not appear at court during the next few days. His father was sick again, and on January 22nd he died, so that William became the Earl of Pembroke. The irony of it made Mall smile mirthlessly.

At the beginning of February the Queen was informed of certain suspicions by Lady Mary Howard, always eager to bring about the misery of someone else.

Mall stood in the Queen's privy chamber, her head held high on her slim neck, her face as white as her starched ruff, pleating her fingers in her skirts and saying nothing.

"Play no games with me," the Queen said bitterly. "I know the man. You have been bedded by Pembroke."

Mall's eyes did not flicker. She stared at a point above the Queen's flushed, furious face and said no word.

"I thought you a sweet, virtuous child," the Queen said suddenly. "Gentle as a lamb. Must it always come to this? Are all women vile below the waist?"

Mall heard the real pain in the dry old voice and her calmness deserted her. She looked at the Queen with affection and regret.

"I am sorry," she whispered.

"Save your pity for yourself," the Queen said, her temples throbbing with savage anger. "False, all of you. Smiles and sweet words, and playing the strumpet at the first opportunity. You taught me to trust you. I should have known that it was false."

"I loved him," Mall cried.

"Does he mean to marry you?" the Queen asked.

"You must ask him," Mall said.

The Queen's temper broke at that. She reviled Mall bitterly,

all her old affection turned to bile, her own sexual jealousy brought into play by Mall's condition. Mall bore it patiently, making no reply, and at last last the strident, raving voice fell silent. The Queen sighed deeply.

"Well, you must be given into some good woman's charge. I'll send for your father. And your lover I'll send to the Tower."

Mall went without caring where she was sent, shut up in a quiet chamber with Lady Hawkins, who eyed her reprovingly when she met her and was angered by her white silence.

Then her father came; hurt, ashamed, anxious and angry all at once, and she thought she would die of misery. He shouted a good deal at first, but gradually quietened.

"Will he marry you?" he asked at last.

"I put my trust in God," she said slowly, wearily.

"Do you love him, Mall?" he asked quite gently.

Her mouth moved wryly. "I wish we had met in different scenes," she said. "God knows we had a chance of happiness."

"Then he may yet marry you," her father said eagerly.

Pembroke had been sent to the Fleet prison. Her father visited him there, but he was adamant. He would not marry her. When Sir Edward asked if he sent her any message William shook his head without looking up.

"There is no kindness in him," her father told her bitterly.

No, none, she thought. She could not blame him. She had brought it on herself. She had been braced to expect it for a long time now, and the weight of it when it fell did not surprise her. Affection is false, the Queen had said to her once. The heart must be guarded. Richard had warned her. She should have listened to them.

Beyond her silent chamber London was in tumult. Essex had moved at last and his revolt had ended in ignominy for him and his followers. London had stayed faithful to the Queen. "There will be executions for it," said Sir Edward to her flatly. "Essex thought to take London like a ripe plum. He courted it long enough, but it proved not his for the plucking. Englishmen have seen enough of woe these last ten years."

"How does the Queen bear it?" Mall asked anxiously.

"She is calm." Sir Edward said approvingly. "They did not alarm her."

No, Mall thought. That was not Essex's crime. He had

betrayed her instead, and she would not forgive him now. He had committed the unforgivable—he had reached up to her crown. She would not forget that.

"He will die," she said, and her father looked at her in surprise.

"Of course, the traitor. Who doubts that now?"

The Queen, thought Mall. She loves. She hates. She will be in torment. She wished vainly she could be with her now and for the days which must follow to sooth her when the fit of anguish came on her.

"I've seen the Earl," said her father gruffly. "He's not to be moved. A cold, hard lad. God curse his insolence."

She did not want to think about William, nor of that other who had blasted her life with his burning lust.

"We will stay in London," her father said, sighing. "He may yet alter his mind if the child is a boy . . ."

Next morning she sat in the garden reading when a servant announced a visitor. She was surprised, having had no visitors apart from her father, but took it to be someone from the Queen.

A tall, dark man walked towards her with a rolling gait which was oddly familiar. He wore plain, quiet clothes and held his hat in his hand, his brown face lit by the cold sunlight.

She looked at him in bewilderment. "Sir?"

He bowed, his blue eyes not quite meeting her own. "I came to bring a gift, Mistress," he said politely, snapping his fingers, and she looked round to see a young boy carrying a great basket of fruit.

Her surprise and puzzlement were obvious. The other man smiled politely.

"It comes straight from the port, Mistress, newly arrived on yesterday's tide. I rode here with it myself."

Her pallor was lost in a flood of dark colour. "Richard . . ." she said starkly.

The other man's blue eyes moved to her face then, and she saw a curious look in them as they examined her.

"Where is he?" she asked huskily. "At sea?"

"Just returned," he said.

She felt coldness touch her heart. Slowly her black head bent as if pain pressed it down. Just returned, she thought bitterly, to hear the latest tale hot from the gossips. What was

he thinking of her? Did he pity her? Was that the meaning of this gift?

Pulling herself together, she looked up, forcing a smile. "Pray, sit down, Master . . . ?"

"Polwhele," he said in his gentle voice.

Her great dark eyes widened. "You are the Cornishman," she said. "I've heard Richard speak of you. You sail with him sometimes."

"We've commanded ships side by side in the battle line," he said with a smile. "Dick and I are old hands together."

She leaned back, feeling a pain around her back which stabbed like iron knives. "Tell me about it," she asked huskily, fighting down the pain.

He gave her a curious, quick look. "Battles are dull tales for women's ears."

"Tell me about Richard fighting in the Azores," she said, hungry to hear his name on someone's lips.

His blue glance was hard. "He is a powerful fierce fighter, Dick. Sometimes I've felt he cared nothing whether he lived or died, he fought so fiercely. I've seen men throw their lives away in mad rage, but Dick fights by instinct, and I never thought to see him in the thick of the battle wishing to die. . . ."

Her eyes lifted, the long black lashes leaving them bare and naked to his inspection. "Wishing to die," she repeated, shuddering. She knew that feeling now.

William Polwhele's eyes pinned her mercilessly. "A man can be worse hurt by a woman's smile than by any dagger," he said.

She gave him a grave, child's smile then. "Men have more ways to escape pain than women, Master Polwhele. They are lucky that they can fight. Women can only submit."

The cold blue eyes travelled oddly over her small, pale face. She felt him survey her as if she were some uncharted island of which he was curious, yet towards which he was hostile.

"You do not need me to tell you how beautiful you are, Mistress," he said flatly. "Beauty like yours can always find an easy path."

She almost laughed in sheer bitter irony. "Thank you for the fruit, Master Polwhele," she said. "When you see Richard . . ." her voice broke off as the utter futility of words left her speechless.

Polwhele watched her firmly. "I will see Richard," he

said. "And what message shall I give him, Mistress?"

"My thanks," she managed huskily.

He smiled coldly. "No more?"

"What more can I say?" she asked, almost to herself.

Polwhere leaned towards her, his face almost bitter. "Shall I tell you what he said to me when I left him yesterday? See her, he said. Tell me how she looks. Find out if she is well, whether she lacks anything, whether there is anything I can do . . ." His voice was savage. "What answers shall I bring him, Mistress Fytton? Shall I tell him you are still his rare black swan of whom he dreams when he is in his cups and forgets that I am listening? I have been consumed with curiosity for years about you, Mistress Fytton. Richard says little, but when he does speak his words betray him. I was not hard to persuade when he asked me to bring you the fruit and fetch him news of you. I wanted to see for myself what spell you could weave to bind him for so long and hopelessly."

She heard his angry hostility behind every word. Her black eyes looked at him vaguely, fighting down the pain which was tearing at her like a savage animal. Passing a trembling tongue over her dry lips, she tried to smile. "And is your curiosity satisfied?"

His eyes flashed. "Yes," he said harshly, his voice low. "Jesu. Yes. You are enough to make any man dream hot dreams, even as you are . . ." And his blue glance moved over her swollen body under the covering Lady Hawkins had placed to warm her in the wind.

She flinched away from what she saw in his swift glance, and as she did so the pain wrenched at her with new agonies she had no strength to bear. A low moan came from her lips, she fell backward, shuddering.

Polwhele leapt up, exclaiming.

"Get my Lady Hawkins," she muttered as the pain subsided enough to speak. He turned and ran, and in a moment she was surrounded by anxious women.

Her child was born in grinding pain that night, a tiny boy, so small she could have held him in the palm of her hand. He died before he had time to open his eyes. Mall was past caring. The brith had drained her of everything but the ability to breathe.

It was the death-knell of her father's last frail hopes. He knew Pembroke would never marry her now. The child had been their last chance. It was gone.

"When you are stronger we will go back to Gawsworth," he told her awkwardly. And she silently nodded her head.

William was kept in prison even after she was released from her confinement into her father's care. Sir Edward took her to a quiet room in an isolated house by the river. There she lay on her bed, eating little, sleeping rarely, her mind obsessed with bitter images of the past.

The spring came slowly, the buds tightening on the branches in green knots, the air growing sweeter and the river sometimes running fast with an easterly wind behind it.

She lay in her chamber now like a dead thing, thinking of nothing.

Like the earth in winter her mind was seeding new thoughts, new emotions. Her love for William Herbert shrivelled and died. His pale, bright image faded, leaving no residue behind. The other man still hovered like a black crow, pecking at her eyes. The savagery and exultation of his passion was too searing to be forgotten lightly. Her mind and body were scorched by him, twisting in the flames of his hunger like a body in torment. He had left her deformed. No doubt, she thought once, he was in like case. He was a strange man.

Essex's trial was hurried forward. The Queen was afraid to leave him in the Tower. The rebellion had to be crushed pitilessly. There was never any doubt as to the verdict. Although he pleaded, cravenly blaming everyone but himself, begging for mercy at any costs, he was found guilty and sentenced to the death.

The city was silent on the day he died. Mall lay listening to the whisper of the river beyond her window, waiting for the sound of the guns to signal his death.

Afterwards she found the days growing more and more alike.

At last in May her father ordered a litter and they rode out of London. Mall lay against the cushions, her mouth bitter, thinking back over the years, the many journeys along this crowded northern road.

She had begun with such high hopes. It was all ending in pain and shame.

Essex was dead, that bright head laid low in the straw, his blood staining the planks of the execution scaffold. Mall wished she could have been with the Queen to help her face that grief. She knew how terrible the Queen's pain must have

been. Love did not die because it was racked by hate. She had found that out for herself.

For weeks she had not allowed herself to think of anything but death, waiting for it, praying for it, unable to understand why it was denied. Death was the only thing which could wipe out her pain.

The litter jogged and she swayed with it, closing her eyes. She would never feel again. Never. She would be like granite for the rest of her life. Nothing should touch her, nothing should harm her. She closed her mouth on a cry of pain. Her hands gripped each other. Nothing.

They stopped at Stanner to rest and refresh themselves. The long journey was almost done. She was too ill to walk into the inn. Her father carried her. "You are so light you could be a child again," he said anxiously. "You are nothing but skin and bone."

He laid her down on the foul-smelling bed in the chamber they had paid for, and looked at her pleadingly. "Will you eat?"

She shook her head. "I'll sleep, Father. You go down and eat. You need it."

He looked at her and sighed, but went. She lay back on the pillows, weeping silently. When the door opened she looked up in surprise, expecting to see her father.

It was Richard Leveson.

Her caught breath hurt. She looked away, her cheeks flaming scarlet.

He walked forward and stood looking down at her. He wore an old leather doublet and russet hose, a cloak hanging from his shoulders. His tanned skin and upright stance brought a breath of energy into the silent chamber.

"Say what you came to say," she said savagely, surprised to feel pain when she had thought she would never feel again.

"What do you think I come to say?" he asked quietly.

She turned her head on the pillow, forcing herself to look at him.

He was in full control, his face calm and expressionless, his brown eyes cool under the bright shadow of the red hair.

"I've heard all the words before. Slut, whore, harlot . . ." Her voice was weary. "Say them and be gone."

"Are you so sick of yourself, Mall?" he asked, and his gentleness wounded like a stab.

"Don't!" She winced. "Don't speak kindly to me or I shall weep again. I have been all the things they call me, Richard." Then, fiercely, "Why are you here? How are you here?"

"I followed you," he said simply. He looked around for a chair, found none and sat down beside her on the bed.

"Why?" she asked.

"What do you mean to do now?" he asked in return. "Gawsworth? That shrew of a mother to bait you and make you wish you were dead?"

"I may go to Nan," she said. "She wrote . . . she says I am to go if I wish . . ."

"Do you wish?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I care nothing for where I go."

He watched her quietly. "Did you love him?"

She flinched. "God knows . . . love, hate . . . tangled in my mind. Does it matter? He had me. That is all that matters."

The deliberate coarseness hardly touched him. He reached out and picked up her hand, stroking the back gently. "I would not say this at such a moment if there was time to wait for the right time, but for your own sanity you must not go back to Gawsworth. Your mother will take her revenge for this."

She nodded. "I know." It was all there waiting for her, the long drawn-out horror of hatred and pain. She almost welcomed it. "I deserve what is going to happen to me," she said. "It is my punishment."

"You've had enough punishment," he said in sudden fierceness. "Mall, come to me."

She looked up at him, frozen in pain and sickness. "No . . . God, oh, no! I may be all the things they say, but I do not deserve that . . ."

He stared at her, frowning. "I cannot marry you, or God knows I would. But I can offer you what you will never get at home, security and peace. I'll take you to my manor at Perton. You'll be provided for if I die. I will see to it that you do not want for anything, Mall."

She was even whiter, her teeth biting through her lower lip until the red blood showed in beads on the colourless flesh. "No, no," she moaned, twisting on the bed in agony.

"You think I have no choice but to take your offer," she flung at him bitterly. "Everyone knows I'm easy game now.

I am the Earl of Pembroke's whore, spoiled and ready for other use now he is tired of me. But not yours, Richard, never yours . . ."

"Why not?" he asked sharply, watching her face.

"Oh, God," she cried, her fists clenching. "Get out of here before I am sick!"

He leaned over her and she shrank away, whimpering like a hurt child. "No, please! Don't, Richard. For God's sake, kill me, but do not touch me!"

He kissed her gently on her moaning mouth, and her eyes shut in hurt protest. "It was all my fault. I should have taken you years ago. My dear love, forgive me."

The truth of that stung worse than any pain she had ever known. She looked at him piteously. "You cannot blame yourself because I am a whore," she said. "You don't know what I have done . . ."

"I don't care," he said. "I know you better than anyone in the world. If I do not blame you, who else has the right?"

She drew a long breath. "It was not only Pembroke," she said, turning the pain into her flesh deliberately, watching his face to see the sick disgust come. "Shakespeare had me, too."

He went white under his tan, but his eyes held hers steadily. "Tell me, Mall."

"Do you want to hear it, Richard? Could anyone hear of such squalid folly and destruction without vomiting?"

He took both her hands, stroking them with his thumbs, as if she were a frightened child he gentled. "It will fester in your mind. I want no secrets between us. You were a sweet, generous, loving child. I cannot blame you. I blame myself. I betrayed you."

"No," she said, weeping bitterly. "I betrayed you. With both of them."

"Tell me," he insisted.

Closing her eyes she poured out the whole story, her words molten, sickened, filled with physical and mental disgust. When she was silent he sighed, but he did not relinquish her hands.

"You will hate and despise me now you know," she said wearily, her eyes still closed to shut out his face. She had destroyed his image of her and ruined the only love she had known in her life.

"You went to Pembroke on the night of Nan Russell's wedding, then," he said quietly.

"Please, I can talk no more of it," she muttered wildly.

His hand closed round her chin, turning her face to him. "Look at me, Mall."

Reluctantly she opened her wet eyes. His face was so white beneath his tan that his eyes seemed almost black.

"You gave yourself to Pembroke that night, Mall, didn't you?" he insisted.

"Yes, yes," she groaned.

"After I had told you I would take Bess Newell for my mistress," Richard said, and she was suddenly very still, his quick perception taking her by surprise. She had not told him why she gave way to William suddenly. She had left out any words which might lay the slightest shadow of blame at his door. The blame was all for her, and the punishment too.

She tried to smile, crookedly. "Do not think it is any fault of yours. I am a whore, Richard. I know what I am."

"My poor little love," he said hoarsely. "I did it for you. I wanted you to be free of me and I could see it was the only way to cut the cord that binds us. I thought Pembroke loved you and would marry you. I had to loose you somehow and I did it in a plain, blunt sailor fashion by a blow." He pulled her into his arms, his hand cradling her sleek black hair. "Oh, my poor sweetheart, what have I done to you?"

She lay, shuddering. "I cannot be your mistress, Richard," she said weakly. Then, her jealousy rising, "I will not take Bess Newell's place in your bed."

His hand pushed back the black hair from her face, fondling the sleekness with long, rough hands. "You cannot go back to your mother. I've seen her letters to your Uncle Francis. She is filled with sick hatred for you. She'll destroy you if she can, and you are too gentle to live under such a rule, Mall. Come with me and let me protect you."

"No," she groaned. "No."

He drew out his dagger and laid it on the pillow, his hand on the cross hilt. "See, I swear on the cross of our saviour, I will not lay a hand on you. You are sick of men's demands, Mall. I know it is too soon to speak of love to you."

She stared at the shining metal. "I will never feel again."

"So says the tree in winter," he told her gently. "But spring comes again."

"I told you that once," she remembered with a sigh.

"I had not forgotten. And you were right. I loved poor Margaret as a boy, but it passed. We are stronger than we think. You will come through this winter, Mall, and I will be there, waiting for the lovely spring."

"I do not even want to feel again," she said, her tears running like rain.

"There is no hurry," he said, wiping away the tears with a tender hand, his fingers lingering on the pale curve of her cheek. "We have all the time in the world now. I have waited long enough to learn patience, Mall. Give me the chance to heal the wound I caused. Let me heal you. I dealt the blow unwittingly, God is my witness. I wanted to free you to love another man."

She looked at him in anguish. Under her brief, febrile passion for William Herbert, under her helpless surrender to Shakespeare, had run her love for Richard like a hidden river, deep and true. But she could not face any more pain. Love hurt too much. Her feelings for him had held her on the rack for years, and she wanted no more agony.

She shook her head. "I cannot be your mistress, Richard . . ."

He sighed. "You are too weak for me to press you, Mall. I'll go, since you say I must, but if you change your mind, send for me."

He rose and began to walk towards the door. Her eyes reluctantly followed him. For so many years the lean, hard body and flame of hair had reigned in her heart. She felt cold. Beyond this room the world was cold and empty. She had only hatred waiting for her at Gawsworth. She had nothing but despair. There was a fierce ache in her heart as he pulled open the door.

"Richard," she cried.

He looked back. She sobbed. Her eyes closed once, then opened, and he still stood there, with that loving kindness in his face, and behind the brown eyes the shadow of a love which beckoned like the rainbow after storm.

She gave a long, hard groan. "I will be your mistress if you want me, but when you tire of me, kill me, do not pass me on to one of your friends, as you did Bess Newell . . ."

He gave a harsh cry. "Tire of you?" He closed the door and looked at her hungrily. "My sweet little love, I will not tire of you even in my grave . . ."

Her slight body trembled. "Do you need to be told I have been utterly yours all my life, Richard?" She gave him a

crooked, helpless little smile. "Since you kissed me in the summerhouse at Gawsworth I have never been free of you . . ."

He looked at her in total gravity. "And you are mine for the rest of my life? I do not take you as a mistress, Mall. You are what you have always been to me, my little love."

Wordlessly she held out her arms and he came running back to her.